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Yung-Chi (Angela) Hou

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Quality assurance of joint degree programmes: what Asia can learn from Erasmus Mundus joint degree programmes in Europe

Yung-Chi (Angela) Hou

Department of Education, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan (Republic of China)

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, with the support of Erasmus Mundus, the number of joint degree programmes in Europe has increased rapidly. In Asia, joint degree programmes have also gained popularity due to the growth of transnational higher education in the region since 2000. However, a joint degree programme is a highly complex and coordinated activity for the university partners involved. Cooperation and coordination are crucial for the quality of any joint degree programme. This study primarily explores QA approaches to European joint degree programmes and their current development in Asia.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; quality assurance; joint degree programme; international accreditation; Asia; Europe

Introduction

Growth in the internationalisation of higher education is driving the expansion of tertiary systems and institutions throughout the world. It articulates cross-border collaboration as well as intensifies student mobility (Daniel, Kanwar, and Uvalić-Trumbić 2009; Moor and Henderikx 2013). According to 'Education at a Glance' by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the number of university students enrolled outside their country of citizenship has increased rapidly worldwide, from 0.8 million in 1975 to 4.1 million in 2010, which is more than a fivefold increase in the past three decades (OECD 2012). Several types of cross-border tertiary education include twinning, franchising, joint and double degrees, distance education, branch campuses, and virtual universities (Knight 2007). Joint degree programmes leading to a certificate issued jointly by the participating higher education institutions have been growing in popularity worldwide (Chan 2012; Guttenplan 2011; Knight 2008).

The number of joint degree programmes in Europe supported by the European Commission has increased rapidly over the past decade. In 2011, 84% of European universities offered joint programmes, and 33% of them awarded joint degrees. By 2012, almost all European countries had implemented the legislation required for joint degrees, and the total number of joint degree programmes had reached 3000. The growth of joint degree programmes has put the issue of their quality assurance (QA) high on the agendas of numerous nations. Currently, the two major concerns for joint degree programmes are whether participating universities indeed provide a high quality learning environment for both domestic and international students, and whether the quality of the joint degree programmes provided has achieved the minimum standards recognised by accrediting bodies. Europe has paid attention to the QA of joint degree programmes but a major challenge persists.

CONTACT Yung-Chi (Angela) Hou  yungchi@nccu.edu.tw  Department of Education, National Chengchi University, NO. 64, Sec. 2, ZhiNan Rd., Wenshan District, Taipei City 11605, Taiwan (Republic of China)

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In Asia, joint degree programmes have gained popularity due to the growth of transnational higher education in the region since 2000. Although complete data on joint degree programmes are unavailable, many Asian nations promote higher education internationalisation through joint degree programmes. This study aims to explore the QA approaches to European joint degree programmes and their current development in Asia. Firstly, the perspectives of European joint degree programmes and QA agencies are analysed. Secondly, lessons for Asian nations are discussed.

Development of joint degree programmes and their QA in Europe and Asia

Joint degree programmes and their QA

An increasing number of universities have developed joint degrees. Several factors explain this phenomenon, including the need to meet changing professional requirements, pressure to restructure degree programmes to become more interdisciplinary, student demand and calls to enhance the specification of some degree programmes (Kuder and Obst 2009; Michael and Balraj 2003). However, a joint degree programme is a 'highly complex and coordinated activity of university partners' (EUA 2006, 9), and its quality is determined by the cooperation and coordination among partner institutions. A European University Association (EUA) survey by Rauhvargers, Bergan, and Divis (2002) described joint degree programmes as having the following common characteristics: they are developed jointly by several institutions; they meet appropriate national QA standards; they involve students from each participating institution who physically take part in the study programme at other institutions; they produce learning outcomes recognised by all participating institutions; they have a jointly developed curriculum and cooperation on admission and examination; and their faculty are encouraged to teach in the joint programme. In addition, Haug (2013) specified other quality indicators that a joint degree programme should adopt, such as the level of intensity of the linkage between the partner institutions, the joint promotion and marketing of the programme, a joint alumni association, an appropriate language policy and the joint management of grants or other financial resources of the programme (Personal communication 2013). Hence, a true joint degree programme means that 'all participating institutions develop the curriculum jointly, each set aside some of their own teaching capacity for the study program and organise an institutionalised exchange of students that features which occur individually in the other types of collaboration mentioned but not in this combination' (Nickel, Zdebel, and Westerheijden 2009, 26). A joint programme should demonstrate 'a distinct culture of jointness', which refers to 'the fact that the whole is more than the sum of its parts' (EUA 2006, 9).

Developing a joint degree is more challenging than developing a double degree. Institutions cannot efficiently support the programmes at home and in foreign countries simultaneously, and collaboration among partner institutions will require time to develop. Some scholars also point out that national regulations limit the establishment of a joint degree programme in many countries (Knight 2011; Nyssen 2011). Dr. Per Magnus Ekö, an author from the Swedish University of Agricultural Science who is involved in the Erasmus Mundus programme entitled 'Sustainable Forest and Nature Management (SUFONAMA)', indicated that 'SUFONAMA is a collaboration between universities in Sweden, Denmark, Italy, Germany and Denmark. However, it is not a joint degree programme but a double degree programme. The students will obtain two Master degrees from universities in the consortium. A joint degree programme is currently very difficult to obtain due to national legislation and university rules' (Ekö 2013). Similarly, most public universities in Hong Kong tend to offer dual degrees instead of a joint degree due to their complexity.

Quality assurance for joint degree programmes has recently started to draw global attention. According to UNESCO/OECD, QA is the systematic review of educational programmes, ensuring that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being maintained (UNESCO/OECD 2005). Quality assurance consists of internal and external parts, which are indeed 'two sides of the same coin that the activities are inextricable interrelated' (Vroeijenstijn 2008, 1).

OECD and UNESCO have developed international guidelines entitled ‘Quality provision in cross-border higher education’ to strengthen QA, accreditation and recognition of qualifications schemes at both national and international levels to assure the quality of international activities in cross-border higher education. The leading QA and accreditation agencies are expected to conduct an external accreditation of cross-border education through international cooperation with other agencies and to develop strategies to cover transnational higher education within national qualification schemes (UNESCO/OECD 2005). The growth in joint degree programmes has pressured institutions and quality agencies to collaborate and develop internal and external QA mechanisms. In contrast to the single assessment of a regular programme, a joint degree programme involves more than one institution and accreditor from different countries in the review process.

Erasmus Mundus joint degree programmes and their QA approaches

To enhance the international visibility and influence of European higher education, the European Union (EU) developed the Erasmus Mundus programme to support high-quality joint Master programmes, which include scholarship programmes for non-EU students to study in Europe. Rauhvargers, Bergan, and Divis (2002) indicated that the Erasmus Mundus programme is ‘relevant to virtually all the goals of Bologna process and will boost the development of joint quality assurance, recognition, and the transparency and convergence of higher education systems throughout Europe, as well as student and staff mobility, graduate employability, the European dimension of studies and the attractiveness of European education all round’ (2). The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) stated that ‘the Erasmus Mundus joint degree programmes is a cooperation and mobility program, which is intended to promote the European Union as a centre of excellence in learning around the world’ (European Commission 2009, 4). However, the Erasmus Mundus joint degree programmes still face quality challenges after a few years of success (Haworth 2013). As de Wit (2013) stated, ‘If the Erasmus programme could rediscover its focus on curriculum and learning outcomes it would not only enhance the quality of the Erasmus experience, it would also increase the interest of faculty and students in it, and as a result numbers would rise’ (2).

Several projects perform QA of joint degree programmes in Europe. To realise the enhancement of university cooperation in Europe through joint degree programmes, the European University Association (EUA) initiated a project called the ‘European Masters New Evaluation Methodology’ (EMNEM) on joint Master’s programmes from 2002 to 2004. The final EMNEM report identified several crucial quality issues throughout Europe. In 2006, supported by the European Commission, the EUA published ‘Guidelines for quality enhancement in European joint master programs’ to ‘help institutions in their reflections on their inter-institutional cooperation and joint degree program development’ (EUA 2006, 6). This document outlined a five-step mode for underpinning a joint degree programme, that is, ‘Idea–Concept–Planning–Agreement–Doing’. All of the partners involved in the process should commit themselves to internal QA based on the quality principles and criteria adopted.

In 2006, ENQA launched Transnational Evaluation Project II (TEEP II), which attempted to examine Master’s programmes jointly offered by several universities in different countries and expected contribute to the development of a method for the external evaluation of joint degree programmes. Three Erasmus Mundus Master’s programmes were considered in the evaluation process, and six QA agencies of ENQA conducted the evaluation exercises. The methodology consisted of a self-evaluation report, a panel of international experts, the participation of students, several site visits and a final report based on pre-defined criteria (ENQA 2006, 2013; NOQA 2009). This experiment was the first attempt at a European QA exercise.

In 2008, by the mandate given by the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) evaluated joint Nordic Master programmes. The project group suggested a need for joint evaluation, which should consider joint programmes as a unit by a single panel, and produce one final report (NOQA 2009).

In 2010, with the support of the European Commission, the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) developed a project entitled ‘Joint Programs: Quality Assurance and Recognition of Degrees Awarded’ (JOQAR) aiming at ensuring the quality of Erasmus Mundus joint degree programmes in terms of accreditation and recognition. In the project, a single accreditation procedure was developed to assess joint programmes according to the ECA assessment framework for avoiding multiple national accreditation procedures (ECA 2013). ECA established the guidelines and principles for joint programmes, and the guidelines should be completed prior to the development of the assessment framework (Aerden and Reczulska 2012). Based on European shared components, the single accreditation procedure emphasises ‘one onsite visit, one single report and outcome’. Taking on the role of Coordination Point, ECA brings ‘the coordinating agency and institutions together, facilitate in planning the procedures, and provide a specific methodology for carrying out single accreditation’ (ECA 2013, 6). The ECA’s single procedure is expected to substitute for the different national QA procedures and assess the joint degree programme as a whole (ECA 2013).

Development of joint degree programmes in Asia

The number of joint degree programmes has increased rapidly in Asia due to growing international aspiration and the desire to enhance academic reputation (Chan 2012; Huang 2007; Li and Chen 2012). Asian universities are inclined to collaborate with foreign research universities, particularly prestigious universities from the United States, Australia and United Kingdom (Huang 2007). For example, the National University of Singapore offers more than six joint degree programmes with Australian National University, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Johns Hopkins University. Its major reasons for collaborating with well-known universities include combining its strengths with those of the partner university and fully integrating international experience into a student’s course of study and research (National University of Singapore 2013).

Many Asian universities have offered joint degree programmes at the PhD level. In 2009, the University of Hong Kong signed agreements with King’s College London, Imperial College London and Universitas 21 to confer a joint PhD degree with its partner institutions (The University of Hong Kong 2013). Peking University has collaborated with Georgia Tech–Emory in a biomedical engineering PhD programme (Li and Chen 2012). Most of these joint degree programmes are offered in professional fields, such as business and management, engineering, computing and information science. An increasing number of Asian universities have also started to collaborate with institutions from neighbouring countries in recent years. However, quality seems to become a major concern in these collaborations. A case study of joint degree programmes offered by a Taiwanese college revealed that the university was challenged by accreditation issues in developing a joint degree programme with China and other Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Japan and India (Chan 2012).

The global trend towards student mobility has driven several Asian nations to stipulate clear statements for a joint degree or an international joint degree programme. The 2003 law, ‘Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Chinese–Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools’, allows the establishment of an international collaborative degree programme or educational institution offered by ‘Chinese and foreign cooperators in running schools’. Although the law did not specify ‘a joint degree program’ in the regulation, it is now applied to all collaborative programmes and institutions between local and foreign universities (Fang 2013). Similar to China, Korea lacks specific regulations and laws for joint degree programmes. The only Korean law on joint degrees is the Higher Education Law, which stipulates that ‘higher education institutions can operate joint degree or double degrees with foreign higher education institutions’ (Byun 2013).

In Taiwan, under the ‘Regulations Regarding the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Academic Credentials for Institutions of Higher Education’ in 2012, students can ‘concurrently study at domestic and foreign universities under an international academic collaboration program’. However, the regulation clearly stated that ‘the accumulated period of study with a master’s degree shall be at least 12 months’. For degree recognition, students should study in a domestic university for ‘no

less than one-third of the total course credits required for the conferral of the underlying degree' (MOE 2012). Hong Kong has developed regulations for non-local qualifications under the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualification Ordinance (AAVQO/Cap 592). The non-local programmes have to demonstrate that they are compatible with the Qualification Framework under the review of The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ), including joint degree programmes (Wong 2013). A qualification jointly awarded by a self-accrediting institution and a non-self-accrediting institution may be entered into the Qualification Register if it is accredited by the HKCAAVQ, and may be a local or a non-local programme (Fearnside 2013).

The Japanese government does not currently allow universities to confer a single degree jointly with universities in foreign countries, according to the *Guidelines for Building Organised and Continuous Cooperation Including Double and Joint Degree Programmes between Universities in Japan and Universities in Foreign Countries in 2009*. In other words, a degree in Japan should be conferred by completing a degree programme instead of a joint curriculum by local and foreign universities (Matsunaga 2013).

East Asian countries other than Japan have attempted to embed joint degree programmes into their national academic framework. To enhance the international outlook of their higher education system, East Asian nations are making efforts to deregulate the requirements of joint degree programmes from restrictive to more liberal (Verbik and Jokivirta 2005).

Research subject and method

This study adopted two approaches for data collection and analysis. Firstly, an on-line survey targeting the consortium coordinators of 12 Erasmus Mundus joint degrees programmes was conducted in 2013 to collect their views on the development of internal and external QA mechanisms and the challenges they faced. Based on ESG, ECA and ENQA principles, the questionnaires were developed in four sections with 35 items, including curriculum design, faculty resource, learning outcome assessment, student recruitment, financial management and preparation for external review. Eight out of the 12 consortium coordinators of joint degree programmes have responded, from the fields of social science, science and humanities. Moreover, one Asian joint degree programme accredited by an international accreditor was selected as an Asian case. The programme head's opinion was collected through an on-line survey. Table 1 shows the list of the nine respondent programmes. In facilitating data analysis, all of the European respondents were given a shortened code for their programmes from A1 to A8.

In addition, the second sources of data were personal e-mail communications with heads of QA agencies, professors in administrative positions in charge of joint degree programmes and QA

Table 1. List of respondent programmes.

Europe		
Field	Name of programme	Number of partnering institutions
Science	European Master in Quality in Analytical Laboratories	3
Social science	European Master of Law and Economics	11
Social science	Joint Master's Programme in International Humanitarian Action (NOHA)	8
Science	Erasmus Mundus Master of Bioethics	3
Humanities and arts	MA in Euroculture: Europe in the wider world, Erasmus Mundus	8
Science	Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Industrial Ecology (MIND)	6
Social science	Erasmus Mundus Journalism, Media and Globalisation	5
Social science	European Master in Global Studies	4
Asia		
Social science	Master of Global Entrepreneurship and Management Program (MGEM)/ in Asia	3

experts. These individuals are from 10 countries, namely, France, Spain, Sweden, Netherlands, Hong Kong, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. The communications occurred between April and December 2013. The interview questions asked of the heads of six QA agencies focused on their attitudes towards the external QA of joint degree programmes, their perceptions of the characteristics of joint degree programmes, the approaches they used to evaluate joint degree programmes and the challenges they faced in the external review of joint degree programmes. E-mail was also used to ask three university administrators and three higher education experts about their experiences in the development of joint degree programmes, QA in cross-border higher education and challenges of maintaining high-quality joint degree programmes. Data from personal contacts were analysed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) method for generating meaning from transcribed interview data. Their methods of noting patterns and themes, clustering items into categories, building logical chains of evidence by noting causality and drawing inferences and making conceptual coherence typically reduce large amounts of qualitative data (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007).

Major findings on the eight European joint degree programmes

Analysis of the characteristics of the eight European joint degree programmes

Most programmes have developed a joint strategy to market and finance the programmes.

The number of participating institutions in the eight joint degree programmes ranges from 3 to 11. They are primarily European universities, except for the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand. The programmes offered vary, including global studies, mass media, European culture, industrial ecology, humanitarian action, analytical laboratories and law and economics. They all have a coherent promotional strategy to market the programmes. In addition, the representatives of the eight programmes responded that they had a joint selection procedure in recruiting students. The representatives of the six programmes indicated that they also developed a joint financial plan regarding course fees. The Erasmus Mundus Master of Bioethics pointed out that

[T]he program was mainly financed by the European Commission which offers some scholarship every year. Catholic University of Leuven manages the finances for the program, but each University can dispose of its part of the funds independently. (A4)

All of the programmes jointly established their objectives and curriculum design.

They held a joint curriculum meeting at least once a year. Students are required to enrol in more than four core courses. Seven respondents stated that the syllabus and course information are accessed by all students before class through a shared on-line system. Five respondents said they were accessible to students through e-mail via a coordination office. The eight programmes adopted English as the language of instruction.

Most programmes emphasised that student learning outcomes and supports are key elements to the success of a joint degree programme.

Six respondents required core competencies for all graduates, including written communication skills, teamwork, creativity and innovation, exploration and critical thinking, verbal communication skills, solving problems, global vision and IT skills. The Erasmus Mundus Master of Bioethics particularly emphasised 'good command of English' as one of the core competencies that students should acquire (A4). They all used multiple methods to assess student learning outcomes, including written tests, individual oral presentation, group work presentation and thesis writing. The European Master in Quality in Analytical Laboratories stated that students were given various written assignments, such as reports and monographs (A1). Students in the eight programmes were given learning resources and support, such as office hours, on-line discussion forums and teaching assistance. Going even further, the Erasmus Mundus Master of Bioethics indicated that its students usually contacted the course coordinator of each course if they needed help (A4). The European Master of Law

and Economics offered an Ombudsman service when students complained about insufficient support (A2).

Most programmes have a high standard of qualifications for faculty members.

Most programmes stated that they acquired teachers with a PhD degree in the field they teach. In addition, the Erasmus Mundus Master of Bioethics emphasised that a good command of English was a requirement. Although most programmes did not offer training programmes for teachers and their pay was not higher than those of other professors, they all provided administrative support for teachers, including teaching assistants and reduced teaching loads.

All of the respondents agreed that 'overcoming national regulation and legislation' is the most challenging task in developing a joint degree programme.

Seven of the eight joint degree programmes responded that 'overcoming national regulation and legislation' is the most challenging task in developing a joint degree programme. Issues include the credits needed for theses or modules, national requirements for academic staff and duration of the programme beyond the requirement of Bologna (Frederiks and de la Carrere 2013). Having adequate administrative support and sufficient funding were regarded as the second most difficult set of problems. A programme cannot be sustainable if no grants support it. 'Developing a joint admission system' was another challenge that was acknowledged by four of the agencies. By contrast, most programmes did not regard 'recruiting qualified teachers' as a problem.

Internal and external QA mechanisms of European joint degree programmes

All of the programmes have developed an internal QA mechanism for self-assessment on a regular basis either individually or by a joint office.

Most programmes established a joint QA office of all participating institutions. By contrast, three programmes conducted internal QA activities individually. They all developed standards for self-assessment, including learning resources, teaching quality, curriculum, learning outcomes, goals and mission and faculty resources. Most programmes integrated all of their partners' national QA agency's standards into their internal QA mechanism. Six of the programmes conducted a self-assessment every year, whereas the others conducted a self-assessment every two to three years.

Most programmes are still reviewed by national QA agencies or multi-agencies. Three joint degree programmes have started to adopt the ECA approach.

Six programmes responded that they had been reviewed by their national QA agency individually. For comparison, six programmes were under review by a joint evaluation of several QA agencies with multiple onsite visits. The European Master of Law and Economics, the Erasmus Mundus Journalism, Media and Globalisation and the European Master in Global Studies indicated that they took part in the ECA's JOQAR, being reviewed by a single panel with one coordinating QA agency. In addition, two programmes opted to be reviewed by an international accreditor. The Erasmus Mundus Master of Bioethics indicated that it had been reviewed by different national QA agencies. The programme underwent review procedures in the Netherlands in 2003 and in Belgium in 2006. The Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Industrial Ecology (MIND) admitted that it has not been reviewed by any QA agency. Our interviews with European QA agencies suggest that they highly recommend the ECA's single accreditation mode, which has been implemented recently in some European joint degree programmes on a pilot basis. With the concept of 'jointness' (i.e. one self-study report, one onsite visit and one final report), the model has begun to be accepted by European institutions and QA agencies. ENQA Vice President Josep Grifol stated,

The ECA single approach is a very good methodology in its core and it is clear for users and flexible to be implemented in different realities. (Personal communication 2013)

'Developing joint assessment standards and mechanisms' and 'setting up the framework of a joint quality system' are the most difficult challenges for external review.

In terms of process and procedure, five respondents said they prepared a joint review report. One or two days were required for one site visit. The number of reviewers ranged from three to five. Most programmes used the final report for self-enhancement. For example, the European Master of Law and Economics used the final report for the internal support of the institutions (A2). The European Master in Global Studies expected the report to promote quality recognition (A8). Most respondents generally agreed that ‘developing joint assessment standards and mechanisms’ and ‘setting up the framework of a joint quality system’ are the most difficult challenges in developing an internal QA mechanism for the programme (A1, A2, A3, A4, A5 and A7).

Lessons for Asia

Asian practice

Most joint degree programmes remained unaccredited by either home or host national QA agencies in Asia. The major approach adopted by Asian institutions is national accreditation, and most joint degree programmes are accredited by both the home and host countries. For example, the Master’s programme in psychology offered by the National University of Singapore and the University of Melbourne had received full accreditation from the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council in 2011. However, no requirement is needed for the accreditation of a clinical psychology programme in Singapore (Rosalind 2013).

The QA mechanism of some business joint degree programmes in Asian institutions relies on an international accreditor, the AACSB. The Master of Global Entrepreneurship and Management Program (MGEM) developed by IQS in Barcelona, Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei and the University of San Francisco is a typical case. The programme is a joint Master’s programme offered by three AACSB-accredited business schools (Fu Jen Catholic University 2013). Students will study at all three schools within one year and will be awarded a joint degree after graduation. Each school individually recruited students, but they jointly decided on the objectives, curriculum and core competencies. A joint curriculum meeting is held once a year. The thesis is supervised and evaluated by the faculty members of each participating institution. Faculty members who teach in the programme have 40% higher pay. As AACSB-accredited institutions, each of the three schools prepares a self-assessment report and conducts an onsite visit. If one institution is not being accredited, then it will probably be withdrawn from the programme.

Although external QA does not currently pose a challenge to the programme, its former director, Dr. Shawn Huang, admitted that several internal QA issues, including designing an integrated curriculum, determining intended student learning outcomes and deciding on joint or coordinated admission, continue to challenge all of the participating institutions (Huang, personal communication 2013).

International accreditation is growing in popularity in Asia

International accreditation has gained popularity in Asia, particularly in business programmes. It primarily relies on the willingness of institutions to apply for it or not. However, not all fields of study are suitable for this mode of assessment. As Byun indicated,

Unless participating institutions have enough motivation to get international accreditation, it would be difficult for an accreditor to encourage them to take part in. Therefore, at least for the moment, an international accreditation based on a specific academic discipline such as AACSB would hardly be a general solution to tackle this issue. (Personal communication 2013)

Matsunaga (2013), director of the International Affairs Division of the National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD-UE) in Japan, expressed the same opinion,

It is really a decision of the institution to undertake an accreditation from an international accreditor. (Personal communication 2013)

Meanwhile, Fang Lee from the Shanghai Education Evaluation Institute suggested,

The accreditation standards and procedures of joint degree programs could be streamlined if the program has obtained the accreditation of international prestigious accreditation agencies, such as AACSB, ABET and ASIIN. (Fang 2013)

European QA agencies do not think that international accreditation provides a good solution to the QA of joint degree programmes. Pol obviously stated,

In fact, AACSB is not an international accreditor, but an American one! I think a joint process or mutual recognition will be better to benefit both international and local accreditors. Nevertheless, I think, international accreditation has surpassed the issue since it might already be the accreditor of each partner of the joint program. (Pol 2013)

International accreditation has challenged the QA systems of higher education in Asia. When universities integrate Western standards, in particular, those from the United States, into the local context, they risk being criticised for assisting ‘cultural imperialism’, which raises the serious issue of national interest in higher education. A QA agency is quite worried about ‘quality colonization’ by Western countries (Hou 2011).

Asian governments and international networks of QA started to collaborate with each other.

As the number of joint degree programmes grows in Asia, the development of a joint QA system becomes an international agenda for Asian governments. This issue also spurred several discussions among governments, QA agencies and international networks in Asia, ascertaining whether Asian countries can develop a single QA framework for joint degree programmes. However, concerns about building an integrated QA system for joint degree programmes persist. Firstly, in contrast to European countries, the mutual recognition of the review outcomes of QA agencies in Asia has not been reached yet, which increases the difficulty of developing a framework for a joint quality system and evaluation standards. Secondly, organising an international panel and recruiting experienced reviewers to assess a cross-region joint degree programme are difficult in most non-English-speaking countries (Byun 2013).

However, some actions and collaborations are being undertaken by Asian governments. For example, the obstacle that hampers the single external review of joint degree programmes in Japan is that an accreditation at the programme level in the country is optional. To overcome this obstacle, NIAD-UE provides a voluntary thematic assessment for the internationalisation of higher education, which would include joint degree programmes in some cases. At the same time, NIAD-UE is exploring the development of a single procedure of accreditation for joint and double degree programmes with the Chinese Higher Education Evaluation Center, the Korean University Accreditation Institute and the Korean Council for University Education (Matsunaga 2013). In Korea, the QA of joint degree programmes is basically at the discretion of each institution. In response to demand, the Korean government has attempted to prepare guidelines, which will serve as a type of government regulation in the future if it is linked to government funding and incentive programmes (Byun 2013).

An interesting question that has been addressed is whether the ECA model can be implemented in the Asian context. Established in 2003, the leading QA organisation in Asia, the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN), has endeavoured to address this point. In 2013, APQN signed an agreement with ECA to learn its single accreditation mode through various collaborations, including staff exchange programmes, development of a joint database for international reviewers, development of principles for cross-border QA of joint programmes and branch campuses and exploration of methodologies to facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications between Asia and Europe (APQN/ECA 2013).

Conclusion

Joint degree programmes are currently regarded as one of the most popular types of cross-border higher education in Europe and Asia. They have brought advantages to students as well as challenges to governments, institutions and QA agencies. Developing a high-quality joint degree programme will require the joint efforts of varying stakeholders to implement a QA mechanism and develop an external assessment system. This study demonstrates that the eight European joint degree programmes had built internal QA mechanisms, either jointly or individually. These joint degree programmes were all reviewed by a national accreditor or a joint panel. Single accreditation procedures initiated by the ECA's JOQAR project provided an alternative.

Compared with European experiences, the current mode adopted by Asian programmes dominantly involves international accreditation. International accreditation is considered to be 'cultural imperialism' to a certain extent and raises the serious issue of national jurisdiction over higher education (Hou 2011; Knight 2007). Although APQN started to collaborate with the ECA to develop single procedures, achieving this goal may require a long time.

The ECA method is apparently the most effective and efficient at present. Qualification recognition appeared to be another challenge to joint degree programmes in Europe and Asia due to different national legislations on the requirements that need to be complied with for degrees in each country. On the one hand, a joint degree programme is expected to facilitate students in developing their careers in a global market. On the other hand, it will only demonstrate the value when it is recognised worldwide. As Knight (2008) stated,

[A] rigorous debate on the vexing questions of accreditation, recognition, and "legitimacy" of the qualifications needs to take place to ensure that international collaborative programmes and their awards are respected and recognized by students, higher education institutions and employers around the world. (22)

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