

JOINT MASTERS FOR EUROPE EUA PROJECT 2002-2003

1 Project Background and Objectives

The Prague Communiqué adopted by Ministers of Higher Education in May 2001 calls for increased attention to partnership between institutions from different countries leading to a recognised joint degree. Universities have responded to this call, and since May 2002, the EUA has run a pilot project, partly funded by the EU Socrates programme, to examine the potential contribution which could be made through joint masters programmes to the European Higher Education Area. While the project is still in progress, this paper aims to draw the attention of participants in Graz to a number of findings which are of relevance to the wider debates on the role of higher education institutions in Europe.

The Joint Masters project builds upon the results of the EUA survey on Master Degrees and Joint Degrees in Europe by Christian Tauch and Andrejs Rauhvargers, and focuses upon actual practice within 11 networks currently offer a European joint masters programme. The project has two main objectives:

- to identify best practice for the development of joint masters programmes at European level.
- to identify obstacles which need to be overcome for the development of joint masters programmes at European level.

2 Methodology

Under the supervision of the Project Steering Committee¹ **two parallel processes** have been initiated. The first process is one of **self-examination** and reflection upon practices within each network. The second process uses **qualitative research**, undertaken through participant observation by a graduate student of each programme. For both processes the same three following themes have been examined, thus enabling comparative analysis of outcomes:

1. **Curriculum integration and sustainability**
2. **Student experience and mobility**
3. **Quality assurance and recognition**

The 11 networks were brought together at a meeting hosted by the University of Deusto, Bilbao, on April 12/13 2003. Discussions resulted in a number of points of agreement, and identification of areas where attention is required in the future.

3 Key findings:

3.1 General issues

- 1) Joint Masters programmes offer **added value** to European higher education through maximising both the **strengths of cultural diversity**, and the **academic strengths** of different partners.
- 2) For these benefits of joint masters programmes to be realised, **more attention to** issues of **inter-cultural learning** is required. While students from diverse backgrounds bring a wealth of experience and potential to classrooms, they also bring a range of different needs which require adequate attention.

¹ The Steering Committee is chaired by Jurgen Kohler. Its members are Jean Brihault, Michael Brown, Roger Downer, Adriano Pimpao, Andrejs Rauhvargers, Carmen Ruiz-Rivas and Christina Ullenius

- 3) As many programmes grow out of established research contacts, the further **development of joint programmes through existing research networks** could have a positive effect on both research and teaching in Europe.

3.2 Recognition and quality assurance issues

- 4) The development of European Joint Masters Degrees is greatly hampered by **restrictive national legislation** which makes the awarding of Joint Degrees impossible. Unless this issue is addressed as a main governmental priority, the potential for joint programmes to become an important instrument for European academic cooperation will not be realised.
- 5) No appropriate institutional quality culture for joint programmes has yet been developed, while external national **quality assurance procedures are largely inadequate** to cope with the challenges of transnational programmes. To help remedy this situation, the networks support the idea of EUA developing work on a European label for joint programmes.

3.3 Curriculum Issues

- 6) **No common European model** for a European Joint Masters Programme exists, and neither should it be sought. Different models have been developed to meet the needs of partners working in different national and academic contexts.
- 7) Despite considerable positive rhetoric towards the concept of European joint programmes, in practice **institutions have showed few signs of providing the necessary support**. Institutions need to assume their proper responsibility for these courses – even though this responsibility may be shared with other institutions, and is therefore sometimes difficult to define and quantify.
- 8) Although **ECTS** is widely used to assist curriculum development, in reality its use is often **rather superficial**, and the interpretation of ECTS varies among institutions. Overcoming national differences in marking systems remains a particular challenge. Use of the Diploma Supplement needs to be encouraged, as it is not a commonly used tool.

3.3 Financial Issues

- 9) European **diversity in higher education funding** cultures **creates challenges** to joint programmes. At European level it seems unlikely that sustainable courses can be developed on a large scale which are free of charge to students from certain countries, while costing considerable amounts to others. For the moment **no solution has been found**.
- 10) **Economic and social issues** are major factors in determining which institutions and students are able to participate in joint programmes. Institutions and students from **Central and Eastern Europe are at a particular disadvantage** in the European landscape. While many institutions claim to strive for a diverse student body, examples of concrete measures which might help achieve this laudable goal are difficult to find.
- 11) One goal of joint programmes is to attract students from outside Europe. The impact of a **European environment with such differentiated tuition and living costs needs to be considered** in this context.