

International quality assurance - the Erasmus Mundus experience

Summary

The Erasmus Mundus programme aims, among its key objectives, to enhance the quality of European higher education through international co-operation and to promote Europe as a centre of excellence in learning. In pursuit of these objectives, Erasmus Mundus has supported the setting up of 116 joint masters courses involving more than 500 European universities since 2004. These masters courses, which cover a multiplicity of disciplines, have awarded full-study scholarships to over 8000 students and welcomed nearly 2000 academics from around the world.

The Erasmus Mundus Quality Assessment (EMQA) project was initiated in 2008 as a voluntary exercise to explore the progress made by six of the earliest Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses. A further six courses volunteered to be assessed in 2009. Through EMQA, the European Commission seeks to understand the process by which “excellence” has been achieved over the life-cycle of an Erasmus Mundus course. Visits to participating courses are conducted in a spirit of trust and confidentiality, the purpose being to identify and acknowledge good practice while learning from failures and challenges.

As a result of these visits, four “Components of Excellence”, crucial to the development of high-quality Erasmus Mundus courses, have been constructed. The “Quality of Teaching and Learning” component addresses the following issues: Designing an excellent curriculum; Communicating course objectives and outcomes; Developing student competencies; Developing learning skills; International learning and working; Developing linguistic competencies; Managing the teaching and learning environment; Research activity and research facilities; Consistent teaching practice; Entrepreneurship and business skills; Internships contributing to student learning; Consistent assessment methods; Formal course review.

“Facilities, Logistics and Finance” covers matters such as: When students apply to your course; Verifying student qualifications; Preparing students academically prior to arrival; When non-European students travel to Europe; Introducing students to European academic practice; When students move between partner institutions; Student finances; Communicating and consulting with students; Benefitting from alumni.

“Quality of Leadership and Institutions” focuses on: The highest quality academic team; Creating a strong course “brand”; Securing and maintaining institutional commitment; International teaching and research; Continuity and leadership; Succession strategies; Financial sustainability.

“Joined-Up Practice and Integration” relates to: Selecting students; Consortium information systems; Policy for course fees; Division of labour across the consortium; A consortium-wide quality assessment process; Managing the consortium; Policy for awarding the master degree.

The EMQA process has led to the development of a Quality Handbook which offers guidance to existing or prospective participants in Erasmus Mundus courses. This is accompanied by an Online Self-Assessment Tool that allows users to assess their strengths or weaknesses in relation to the “Components of Excellence”. Both are available via the Erasmus Mundus Excellence website (<http://www.emqa.eu>).

The added value of these products is that they are based on practical feedback from those who have actually been involved in delivering Erasmus Mundus courses. Courses participate in a collaborative and non-judgmental process, building and sharing experience and thereby raising the levels of quality and refining the EMQA tools.