

Ghent, 7 May 2013

Ghent University has been an active participant in the Erasmus Mundus programme from its very start in 2004. As concerns Action 1a, in the academic year 2012-13 it coordinated no less than seven Erasmus Mundus joint master programmes and was partner in two more. It enabled the institution to build up a large experience in the development and implementation of joint study programmes, which can be of relevance in the context of the development of the EU's new integrated programme for education, training, youth and sport (2014-2020).

Given the European Commission's intention to integrate the various current programmes for education into a single new programme and streamline procedures in doing so, recommendations on the handling of double/joint degrees – hitherto mainly promoted through the Erasmus Mundus programme - are to be expected and welcomed. However, instead of separating out this type of collaboration on the mere basis of the degree model (double, multiple, joint, etc.), a diversification can also be made within this category along various other lines. In turn this might have an impact on any future administrative recommendations.

First of all, as an example, differentiation can be made according to the level of integration these collaboration types set out for themselves as their objective.

A joint master programme as envisaged by the Erasmus Mundus programme (I and II) is to be a fully integrated programme with compulsory mobility. The level of integration - one of the award criteria - becomes a distinguishing additional feature, an added value, sometimes unofficially referred to as 'jointness'. The programme is more than the mere sum of the individual components on offer at the individual partner institutions. Specific learning outcomes are drafted for the joint programme as a whole. One of the consequences is that the organizing consortia become trans-institutional organizing entities, albeit without legal status.

Many models for mobility tracks have come up after the start of the EM programme. Sometimes students all start at one location, after which they will spread out over the consortium, in other cases they will start rightaway at various locations, but come together at one point during the programme, after which they spread out again, etc. The actual variety in mobility paths renders the notions 'home' and 'host' institution obsolete: students are students of the programme and the consortium, not of one single institution in the programme (the only way to determine this if needed, would be to take into consideration their degrees obtained previously, but this is meaningless in this discussion). As a consequence, in a structure which is not bilateral, but multilateral the model of learning agreement with its bilateral terms 'home' and 'host' institution loses relevance. It would be practically unfeasible if bilateral learning agreements were to be concluded for all mobilities throughout the consortium, based on the mere criterion of where a student was first and then will study next. In other words, it's a lot of 'bilateral' paperwork without real meaning. Courses are put on offer on the consortium level and presented as a whole, from which students make a choice, in close connection to the predefined mobility trajectories, which are often designed according to thematic lines. There is no such thing as a course at one partner institution in the consortium to replace a course which would have been taken at another partner institution in the same consortium.

Instead, consortia offering integrated joint study programmes which have the ambition to deliver a joint degree, tend to organize themselves in 'star-shaped' structures for overall record-keeping (i.e. collecting all student-related data), whereby one institution is administrative coordinator and keeps track of all study results, for all students, regardless of the fact whether they physically attended classes there or not. In the case of the joint programmes coordinated at Ghent University, the student and study programme administration collects not only all student-related data throughout the consortium and regardless of their mobility track, but also the entire course offer for the programme across all partners, which is displayed in its course catalogue. There is no need for learning agreements or transcript of records: mobility tracks are defined in advance, students are assigned to these, marks are passed on from the various partner universities where evaluations took place, and registered centrally at the coordinating organisation. Prior to the start of the programme, these arrangements are detailed in a consortium agreement, which in fact 'overarches' the need for individual learning agreements per student.

It is widely known that the awarding of joint degrees is not allowed in all countries. Some programmes which aspire to integrate to the level of what I described above, as a consequence can 'only' award double or multiple degrees (two or more separate degrees). The situation is however different for partnerships which do not have the ambition to establish a fully integrated joint programme, but are willing to award double degrees as two separate national degrees, based on an intensive bilateral exchange of students. It might be equally valuable an ambition for partners to keep two separate 'national' programmes, for instance if they still want to enroll 'non-mobile' students into these programmes. If the two separate programmes have sufficient parallels in the learning outcomes, double degrees can be awarded to mobile students, as an added factor of attraction over a standard bilateral exchange with recognition of credits. It seems perfectly plausible to keep the standard 'bilateral' learning agreement for these instances, including the notions home / host institution, even though one would expect that both programmes know one another's content sufficiently well in order to arrange for the automatic recognition and degree awarding in an ex-ante agreement between both institutions, detailing the relevant courses.

Conclusion: recommendations for the regulation of procedures within double/joint degree programmes can be valuable, but will need to do so with enough attention to diversification within this complicated category of collaboration types, and with enough consideration for the concepts and many practical lessons learnt within a.o. the Erasmus Mundus Action 1 programme, which is to integrate into the EU's new programme for education, training, youth and sport '(2014-202). A diversification could be made according to the following lines:

- level of programme integration aimed for by the partners involved
- type of degree awarded
- mobility: compulsory or optional
- number of partners: bilateral, or multilateral (consortium-level)

Andries Verspeeten
Policy Advisor
International Relations Office
Ghent University