

Cross-border collaborative activities among higher education institutions take place in transnational environments which feature multi-actor, multi-level, and multi-purpose settings. The institutional work of co-creation and the maintenance of joint programmes and their quality practice involves a combination of policy work, the establishment of networks and associations as well as the development of normative frameworks which to a large extent are grounded in organizational 'best practices'.

The praxis of quality is relational as it is driven by a recursive interaction of processes, events and activities taking place in policy (macro level), among and within HE institutions (meso level), and through daily work (micro level).

The quality of joint programmes at the macro level is conceptualized as 'high', having added value, whereas the practice of quality is tied to the concept of fitness-for-purpose and features a holistic and continuous process of quality assurance that includes assessment, evaluation and enhancement-driven activities. The construction and enactment of joint programme quality at micro and meso levels involve balancing multiple interests, adhering to various requirements and adjusting to the specificity of the programme. The following key strategies aid daily quality work: 'embracing differences', 'learning and support from peers', and 'developing a shared understanding'.



Illustration: Tanja Lozej

Lina Zenkienė

# INSTITUTIONAL WORK OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Study Of Cross-Border Joint Programmes



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A Study Of Cross-Border Joint Programmes

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PhD dissertation

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## PREFACE

This doctoral work grew out of my personal and professional interest in quality phenomenon in higher education, meanings and interpretations of quality concept and its practices. Quality in higher education is not a new topic. It, nonetheless, is important for universities to stay relevant and future-oriented. The more I engaged with a concept of quality, and the enactment of quality practices in my career in higher education, the more I understood that discussions about quality hardly leaves one unmoved. One may even detest talking about it because it is not something that is easy to articulate or the topic is overused. Quality discourse has permeated national and supra-national policy in higher education, academia and society at large. The issue of quality has become part of university offices holding an official role of ‘safeguarding’ quality as well as those who are genuinely interested in enhancing their everyday activities, be it teaching, administration or research. Since I share a view on quality as an orientation on action, something people do, rather than a state of being, I, therefore, dedicate this study to academics and higher education professionals who deeply care about their work, who are passionate to innovate and change so that education is enjoyable, both up-to-date and forward leading.

By viewing higher education ‘quality work’ both as a situated accomplishment of those working on the shop floor level, i.e. daily work of higher education staff as well as an interaction of processes, events and activities undertaken in policy, professional networks, among and within higher education institutions, I hope to have offered a view of quality as dynamic, open, contested and negotiated phenomenon, especially in the context of cross-border collaborative higher education activities.

What we may learn from this study is that in the endeavour of quality enhancement, the cooperation of higher education stakeholders, universities, and individuals, a cross-fertilisation of ideas, even if takes place in the competitive environment, may

not be undervalued, and that openness to differences, learning and support from peers as well as shared understanding is important in dealing with quality issues in the transnational context.

What I am convinced from this study, is that quality should not be taken-for-granted. I was re-assured that quality is a process, not a status quo, and that quality enhancement is a continuous and ongoing process. So *quality is a pursuit, not a destination*. This has been exemplified by the everyday work of JP staff who acknowledge that in practice it is learning by doing, trial and error, experimentations and failure at times. Quality work, thereof involves balancing multiple interests, adhering to various requirements and adjusting to the specificity of the case.

A role of policy makers, governments and university management is to make sure that staff at universities who deal with quality education provision on a daily basis have the best possible conditions, enough autonomy and flexibility to do their job best. Governments and management might construct and impose certain standards upon higher education providers, however, every educational setting has its own specificities that need to be dealt with and those who are closest to the educational processes know those specificities the best; so that improvements are made in response to stakeholder demands, and to the benefit of the ones in the front line, the students.

L.Z.

Klaipėda, June, 2020

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This study grows out of my general interest in ideas, concepts and interpretations of quality and its practices in higher education (HE), how they travel among higher education institutions (HEIs), how they get adopted and enacted, and with what institutional outcomes. In this study, I am particularly interested in exploring the dynamics of institutional, quality-related developments and how they might be facilitated or constrained in the context of a cross-border, inter-organizational environment.

### 1.1. Research topic and its significance

#### *1.1.1. Cross-border collaborative degree programmes – a growing phenomenon in higher education?*

Cross-border collaborative degree programmes, developed and executed by several HEIs in different countries, are a recent phenomenon in HE. They began in Europe around the 1990s and have become an important global trend in the HE field (Obst and Kuder, 2012). The number of collaborative degrees, including joint degree programmes in the European Union (EU) as well as other parts of the world, was reported to be growing (Obst and Kuder, 2012; Michael and Balraj, 2003). Also, an increased interest was identified among HEIs worldwide to develop joint programmes (JPs) in the near future (Kuder and Obst, 2009; Obst and Kuder, 2012). For instance, 2011 survey data indicated that 95 percent of the 245 HEIs from 28 countries already offering programmes of collaborative nature plan “to expand their current portfolios of joint- or double-degree programs in the future” (Obst and Kuder, 2012, p. 5). Trend data collected and published by European University Association (Sursock, 2015), claimed joint programmes to become “the hallmark of European higher education and a way of capitalising on European cultural, linguistic and academic diversity” (p. 43). In 2015, only 18 percent of HEIs in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) indicated that they were not engaged in any joint programme related activities with institutions in other countries (ibid.).

Academic programmes of a collaborative nature are seen as ways to restructure programmes in order to meet the needs of changing professions, expand international activities of institutions engaged, and at the same time to enhance their visibility, attractiveness and/or prestige (Michael and Balraj, 2003; Obst and Kuder, 2012). The objectives of collaborative arrangements in HE are usually linked to the attribute of quality (Offerman, 1997). The improvement of quality may be one of the strategic aims both of policy work and institutions engaged in

collaboration. This is the case, for instance, with the EU-initiated Erasmus Mundus programme (EACEA, 2009) and joint doctoral programmes in Lithuania (Puksas, 2016). The quality of programmes and awards in the EHEA are linked with wider public debates and Europe's aspiration to be the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world (Lisbon Strategy) (Council of the European Union, 2000), boosting EHEA's attractiveness in the face of growing internalization of HE around the globe.

Kuder and Obst (2009) report on transatlantic degrees and they highlighted the need "to identify the most successful models and good practices for such endeavors" (p. 40). In 2008, the European Commission (EC) funded the Erasmus Mundus Quality Assessment (EMQA) project for international Master and Doctoral programmes aimed at identifying quality issues and practices in Erasmus Mundus Courses as well as guiding HEIs in quality-driven processes for those courses.

While there is a growing body of literature on JPs and their best practices in the EHEA, to my knowledge there are no empirical investigations on the topic of this dissertation: *how the quality of joint programmes is defined and how the actual practice of it is addressed in such engagements.*

### *1.1.2. Quality developments in higher education*

In the past few decades, attention to quality in HE has led to the development of diverse quality assessment, assurance, and enhancement practices at various levels: organizational, national and supra-national. In the EHEA, such developments have been accompanied by policy-driven measures such as setting standards and guidelines for HEIs such as the ESG (EUA, 2005, 2015), Guidelines for Quality Enhancement in European Joint Master Programmes (EUA, 2006), and introducing such structures as European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). These were to ensure the implementation of external (system level) quality assurance (QA) schemes and foster the development of internal (organizational level) quality related processes in HEIs. At the same time, HEIs were held to greater transparency and accountability. According to the predecessor of the current ESG, the development and implementation of internal quality enhancement strategies should lead to the assurance of quality and the meeting of certain standards:

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this,

institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. (ENQA, 2009, p. 8)

HE research suggests that despite the heightened attention to quality at the policy level, “developments of internal quality processes within institutions are still far from well developed in many cases” (Harvey, 2009, p. 3). Qualitative analysis of internal QA in HEIs, conducted as part of Bologna Stocktaking exercise, proved “the need to increase the focus on internal quality assurance within the EHEA” (Rauhvargers, Deane and Pauwels, 2009, p. 51). A case study, conducted as part of the European University Association project (2006) on quality, highlighted the issue and challenges associated with promoting and developing a common quality culture specifically in the JP setting. Such challenges have been primarily related to the issues of overcoming differences in the legislative environment, external quality frameworks, as well as agreeing on a common QA philosophy (p. 22). QA in HEIs in general is considered to be problematic. Among major challenges are the competing discourses of accountability and audit on the one hand and learning and enhancement on the other (Krause, 2012).

Numerous empirical studies have been conducted exploring how external social forces, and national quality schemes, such as programme and/or institutional evaluations, influence internal (organizational) quality developments and processes (e.g., Gift and Bell-Hutchinson, 2007; Stensaker, 2003). Fewer studies have investigated the influence of internal quality development and particular quality mechanisms, e.g. student surveys and performance indicators (e.g., Barrie and Ginns, 2007) on actual quality improvements. HE quality scholars (e.g., Harvey and Williams, 2010b; Stensaker, 2007) make the observation that while the number of publications on QA and quality processes grows, there is still a lack of sophisticated studies on the impact of QA. According to Stensaker (2007), this is primarily because of methodological problems since

impact suggests a causal relationship between organisational initiatives and organisational effects, a fact suggesting that impact studies should be related to specific definitions and understandings of quality. However, since we also know that quality is a relative concept (Harvey & Green 1993), we then also need to take into account that studies of impact should mirror this, with the consequence being that we need to broaden our (often rather narrow) understanding of where to look for ‘impact’. (p. 61)

Another reason related to the lack of studies on the impact of QA could be, as noted in the Quality Culture Project report, that quality improvement “is a continual process that does not have a defined end but must constantly strive towards better quality. Therefore, the lack of a clear end point makes it difficult to

measure impact” (EUA, 2006b, p.29). Harvey and Williams (2010b) assert that “ultimately, it is what goes on routinely in institutions that impacts on quality” (p.83). Particularly this observation is taken into account in this study where organizational practices in JP setting are analysed.

### *1.1.3. Complexity of higher education institutions*

HEIs are highly complex organizations with unique missions, governance, management and decision-making structures as well as differences among disciplinary communities, organizational cultures, and interpretations of quality. The complexity of HEIs stems from the nature of academic work and the value of autonomy which contributes to the way they are organized as loosely coupled organizations (Weick, 1976) or organized anarchies (Baldrige *et al.*, 1977). Although in the last twenty years, a new public management ideology (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007) considerably altered the organisation and management of HEIs, placing value on money, efficiency, accountability, and transparency, consequently leading to increased managerialism and to an audit culture.

Another source of complexity as theorized by organizational scholars is the external environment in which universities operate, considering their inter-relationships with other organizational fields, e.g. the state and industry. Daft *et al.* (2010) contend that the more heterogeneous and the higher the number of external elements exerting influence on organizational operations, the higher the complexity. Universities not only have to deal with, e.g., granting agencies and foundations, professional and scientific associations, alumni, parents, legislators, etc. but also “cope with numerous ever changing government regulations, competition for quality students and highly educated employees, and scarce financial resources for many programs” (p. 148). In relation to the focus on quality in HE, Krause (2012) notes that a broad range of stakeholder groups including students, university staff, governments, employers, research sponsors and media engages in the quality conversation for diverse reasons (p.287).

## **1.2. Research problem and questions**

Cross-border collaborative projects executed by several HEIs operate in different organizational quality cultures as well as multiple institutional environments, e.g., varied national HE regulatory environments and external quality frameworks, and are surrounded by complementary and competing discourses of quality in terms of accountability, assurance and improvement. A contested notion of quality and

multiple discourses of quality are driven by broader social values attributed to HE and thereby plural institutional logics. Thornton (2004) describes institutional logics as “overarching sets of principles that prescribe ‘how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behaviour, and how to succeed’” (in Greenwood *et al.*, 2011, p. 318). Educational organizations face multiple institutional logics, and thereby are subject to enduring institutional complexity (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; Thornton, Jones and Kury, 2005). As higher education researchers note, HEIs are of a “traditionally incoherent normative nature” (Frølich *et al.*, 2013, p. 82). Often these multiple logics are “in conflict... [i.e.] their respective systems of meaning and normative understandings, built into rituals and practices, provide inconsistent expectations” (Greenwood *et al.* 2011, p. 321). In relation to quality processes in HEIs, accountability has been tackled primarily by compliance, assurance by control mechanisms, while improvement has been associated with organizational learning.

Collaborative arrangements as JPs offer a rich empirical site for studying how organizational actors deal with institutional complexity. For instance, how they manage tensions arising from competing quality-related expectations; additionally, how they align national and international regulations with everyday activities and with what consequences. Collaborative arrangements might facilitate new developments of quality driven activities if members of organizations share ideas about quality and its practices among each other, as well as question the intentions and principles of joint quality initiatives, and the effectiveness of current organizational practices.

The study explores the phenomenon of joint programmes and their quality developments in the EHEA, the environment of transnational HE. The aim is to develop an enhanced understanding of the relational and situated nature of the quality of HE and practices by examining how quality in cross-border collaborative arrangements such as JPs is constructed, enacted, and with what outcomes. The study explores how the discourse and practice of quality emerge and is promoted by HE stakeholders in the EHEA; how staff of HEIs, who are engaged in JP provision, develop a shared understanding of what JP quality is and how it should be addressed, e.g., maintained, enhanced and/or assured; how staff of HEIs build awareness through experiencing multiple, contradictory, and competing discourses of quality; how they manage to overcome tensions between efficiency and effectiveness, accountability and improvement agenda, and with what institutional outcomes. I explore and analyse the role of organizational actors in the enactment of certain quality practices in a selected JP (further SOLO) and, thereby,

either maintain, disrupt or create new institutional arrangements. Based on the above objectives, this study aims to answer these central questions:

- RQ 1. What are the joint programme developments in the EHEA?
- RQ 2. How is the quality of joint programmes constructed and enacted?
- RQ 3. What is – from the institutional work perspective – the practice of quality in joint programmes?
- RQ 4. Does the practice of joint programmes and their quality lead to enhancement?

### **1.3. Anticipated contributions**

The study aims to contribute to two streams of academic literature: higher education and its quality, and to institutional work (IW) and complexity. First, the study provides a thorough review of JP developments contributing to the state-of-the-art understanding of JPs in the EHEA. Second, guided by an IW framework, the study contributes to the ongoing debate about quality in HE and the effects of quality-related processes. Studies on the impact of quality-driven practices are not unproblematic. This is due to the complexity of quality in HE, its multifaceted, value-laden, stakeholder, and context relative nature, its process-like approach with no clear end point, and its praxis as an interaction of a macro and micro environment in which activities and solutions are constructed. The analysis of JP quality developments in the EHEA are supplemented with the examples of a selected case, aims to offer a more nuanced narrative of JP quality, explicate its relational and situated nature by exploring how quality related activities are driven by various actions, goals, and interests of multiple actors.

IW theoretical explanations offer a novel approach to the study of the longstanding issue of quality in HE. The analytical framework of IW offers a perspective in which to view quality-related developments in JPs as the ongoing interaction between structural and agentic elements (quality praxis) and, as a situated accomplishment of actors engaged in quality-driven activities. It also allows an analysis of the impact of quality developments as inherently linked to a constitutive nature of quality praxis and institutional logics. Institution (here – JPs and their quality practice) is viewed as located in the sets of practices in which people engage, rather than emerging from those practices and existing at some “other” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) (macro-) level. Therefore, only by studying how organizational members construct solutions to address the issue of quality, what practices they reproduce, what meanings and intentions they attach to quality-

related activities, will we be able to connect the effects generated by those activities. As Lawrence *et al.* (2009b) theorize, by studying agency, we are naturally interested in the intentionality of human action, “both the degree to which it is connected to the institutions in which it is embedded, and the degree to which it is motivated to affect those same or other institutions” (p. 14). It is expected that this study will offer a more refined understanding of the impact of quality-related processes, and the either intended or unintended results that these processes might bring about.

Also, despite the growing scholarly literature on IW, there is a lack of studies on how organizational actors cope with and respond to institutional complexity (Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen and Van de Ven, 2009; Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012), the environment where co-existing and interdependent logics prevail. This study offers an empirical account on how organizational actors deal with institutional complexity in their daily activities. A close-up examination of organizational actors’ everyday work, the interplay among intentionality, actions, and outcomes related to quality developments (practices) in a JP was conducted.

A multi-level analysis was undertaken including:

- (a) macro (or institutional) examination of regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive frameworks guiding the developments of JPs and their quality practices;
- (b) meso (or inter-organizational) analysis of joint quality strategy and mechanisms that are part of collaborative arrangements among departments and their respective institutions engaged in the project (JP);
- (c) micro (or individual) examination of HE professionals’ interpretations of JP quality and associated activities in multiple departments and their respective institutions which are engaged in a collaborative project (JP).

This project incorporates the analysis of a case with embedded units. This type of case studies is not a common research avenue in IW studies. The case involves departments spread across multiple organizations (universities) in different countries running a JP. This setting is quite distinct from, for example, studies of practices in multinational companies (MNCs) with parent and host organizations (Kostova, 1999; Kostova, Roth and Dacin, 2008), everyday work in merging firms situation (Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012) or the inter-organizational collaboration among organizations from different sectors (e.g., Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips, 2002). Nonetheless, it shares the complexity of institutional environment in which organizing occurs. In this study, university departments



engaged in a partnership, are embedded in different organizational quality cultures and respectively in varied national environments and supra-national EHEA, the boundaries of which may be dissipating.

#### **1.4. Dissertation structure**

The remainder of this document is organized as follows. Chapter 2 offers some background information on the phenomenon of quality and its practices in HE. A review of quality is concluded with a brief discussion about the implications for the study.

Chapter 3 includes my initial theoretical considerations which were instrumental in discerning the most feasible approach and design for the study. The chapter continues with a more detailed overview of theoretical underpinnings guiding the study, that is IW and its roots in institutional theory and practice scholarship, as well as the intersection of HE quality and IW literature. The chapter concludes with the theoretical framework guiding the exploration of the research questions.

In Chapter 4, I outline my ontological and epistemological considerations and include the specifics of the approach, design, and analysis. Key methodological issues such as ethical considerations, research quality criteria typical to the chosen design, and my role as the researcher are discussed.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide the details of the empirical part of the study. The analytical focus in these chapters is on the institutional work elements of JPs and their quality: key players (actors), purposes and processes (activities and actions) linked with the emergence and development of JPs and their quality practice (institution). Due to a multi-layered nature of quality phenomenon, and the multi-level (macro-meso-micro) analysis carried out, empirical findings build upon each other towards answering the research questions. At each level of analysis, there is a new spin on various quality elements and aspects. These new spins include different quality-related actions and activities undertaken by various actors, underlying meanings and interpretations of quality driven developments, quality dimensions, indicators and practices that build our understanding about the institutional work of co-creating and maintaining JPs and their quality practice.

Chapter 5 offers insights in the nature and developments of JPs in the EHEA including the establishment of the Erasmus Mundus programme. In this part of the dissertation, I both synthesize scarce literature on JPs and their developments and draw on the expertise offered by professional networks and associations. I further examine the phenomenon of JPs as part of broader European level HE

developments such as the Bologna Process and as an instrument used by the EHEA community to achieve the Bologna objectives. The analysis of quality driven processes and documents guiding the development and implementation of academic programmes, including JPs in the EHEA, provide us not only with insights into the regulatory, normative and cultural cognitive elements of quality related practices, but also organizational praxis in the field of JP quality.

In Chapter 6, quality-related developments and practices in a selected JP programme (SOLO) are analysed, including a discussion on how institutional field-level quality developments, an emergent discourse on quality assurance, normative orientations based on ‘best practices’ discussed in previous chapters are played out in everyday actions and interactions of JP staff at their departments and institutions.

Drawing on data provided in Chapters 5-6 and the analysis in light of the theoretical framework provided at the end of Chapter 3, in Chapter 7, I summarize findings around the research questions, offer insights on contributions to the research field of higher education and institutional work studies. I also briefly reflect on the theoretical and methodological choices made, and the advantages and limitations that came out of these choices. Practical and theoretical implications as well as future research avenues are discussed.

## II. BACKGROUND

In this chapter, I first review the concept of quality and its practices in HE as well as reflect on the multidimensional and contested nature of quality and its formal and situated meanings depending on the level of analysis (system, organization, individual). Since this study also focuses on organizational quality practices or as Randall (1988) puts it “the meso-structures, occupying the middle ranges of the micro-macro continuum” (p. 251), the tensions between micro and macro, agency and structure are inevitable. A brief review of the quality phenomenon in HE illustrates such an ongoing tension.

### 2.1. Quality in higher education

#### 2.1.1. *The concept of quality*

Quality is a multidimensional concept (UNESCO, 1998). Moreover, it is fluid, taking on a variety of definitions and meanings. It has a tendency to evolve and change with time. A major issue in the discourse and practice of quality is that “what counts as quality is contested” (Barnett, 1992, p. 3). As epistemological and empirical studies of quality in higher education suggest (Harvey and Green, 1993; Freed and Klugman, 1997; Tam, 2001; Harvey, 2009), quality means different things to different people at different times, and in different contexts.

In their meta-analysis of 320 contributions published in 15 volumes of the journal *Quality in Higher Education*, Harvey and Williams (2010a) concluded that quality, due to its multi-faceted and contested nature with political undertones, must necessarily be interpreted in terms of purpose and context (p. 7). Based on Rittel and Weber’s (1973) notion of “a wicked problem”, Krause (2012) asserts that it provides a useful lens in analysing HE quality. “A wicked problem” of quality may be characterized as “ill-structured and strongly shaped by social forces such that judgments about possible solutions vary widely and may depend on the values and goals of individuals or institutions” (p. 286). Moreover, as research into HE quality shows, the meaning of quality will depend considerably on the level of analysis (Krause, 2012). As Krause points out, “at the national and institutional levels, quality is typically *formally* defined and equated with such terms as ‘excellence’, ‘consistency’, ‘value for money’, or ‘fitness for purpose’” (p. 288), whereas at the micro, i.e. departmental level, *situated* meanings such as ‘ritualism’, ‘tokenism’, quality as ‘impression management’ or ‘lack of mutual trust’ are found (Newton, 2002). A sample summary of various concepts is provided in Appendix B, representing definitions that circulate in HE.

The many definitions of quality circulating in HE, as Krause (2012) noted is “not necessarily exclusive, rather they highlight the ongoing tension in higher education between efficiency and effectiveness” (p. 290). Harvey and Williams (2010a) contend that empirical studies on quality in the last 15 years clearly indicated “the tension between quality assurance as a bureaucratic and administrative task and the improvement of the quality of academic endeavors” (p. 24). The aforementioned insights into the quality phenomenon in HE indicate that ideas about quality and its practices are embedded in certain discourses. Vidovich’s (2001) study of quality developments in Australian HE confirm that multiple discourses of quality is a global and local phenomenon arising from “persistent contradictory tensions... between assessments of *process* and *outcomes* dimensions; between satisfying *internal* and *external* stakeholders; between *qualitative* and *quantitative* measures of quality; and between *diversity* of institutions across the sector and *uniformity* of provision” (p. 251). In the European context, for instance, the latest developments of quality related to study programmes revolve around the discourse of learning outcomes and their measurement. These discourses are linked with broader social values and processes attributed to HE, e.g., academic freedom and autonomy, consumerism and market orientation, competitiveness and globalization, and entrepreneurialism and innovation.

### 2.1.2. *Internal quality practices*

*Internal quality practices* may involve various organizational activities, processes, procedures, instruments, methods, models, policies, and strategies of quality management. These might include a range of mechanisms from programme assessment and evaluation, learning outcomes assessment, peer review of teaching, student surveys, performance indicators and benchmarking to elaborate QA systems such as Total Quality Management (TQM), the European Foundation for Quality Management model (EFQM) or even the model of service quality (SERVQUAL). A variety of quality practices and organizational developments may be targeted at subjects/courses, programmes or departments. They could be focused on various *functions*, such as teaching, research, or service and might serve a variety of *ends*, such as control, monitoring, enhancement, assessment, decision-making, and accountability. Choosing which practices to employ requires knowledge, skills, awareness and reflexivity on the organizational actors’ part.

External demands for QA, especially regulatory mechanisms such as legislation, the tension between improvement and accountability, and an ‘auditing culture’, triggered by the corresponding prevalence of ideas and strategies drawn from the ‘New Public Management’ ideology, which promotes a more ‘business-focused’

management approach including programme self-assessments, benchmarking, etc. (Deem *et al.*, 2007), consequently have effects on the internal quality developments within HEIs. Good examples of such developments in the EHEA are the ESG, Guidelines for Quality Enhancement in European Joint Master Programmes (EUA, 2006a), and EQAR (also see sections 1.1.2 and 3.3.3).

On the one hand, empirical studies on quality in HE report (e.g., Rostan and Vaira, 2011) that excellence [quality] is undergoing a process of ‘institutionalization’. The core principles, beliefs, values and assumptions underlying organizational practices are seen, following Bourdieu, as the construction of the academic ‘habitus’, ideology of the ‘field’ and social norms. The institutionalization that Rostan and Vaira (2011) refer to is seen “as a process by which such an ‘object’ [excellence or quality] gains a growing degree of legitimation and taken-for-grantedness given to it by social actors (Berger and Luckmann, 1966)” (p. viii).

On the other hand, there are studies, which report varied responses to external pressures, e.g., surveillance (Barrow, 1999), resistance (Anderson, 2006; Stamelos and Kavasakalis, 2011), and unintended consequences of quality initiatives (Newton, 2000). Anderson’s study (2006) revealed academic staff’s resistance to quality assurance mechanisms, which they perceived to be undermining the notions of quality as excellence, instead replacing it with ‘instrumental’ and ‘minimalist’ notions (p. 171). Although scholars acknowledge that a mutually agreed understanding is a prerequisite for overcoming resistance and easing existing tensions, the question of how to reconcile clashing ideologies of compliance and enhancement remains a challenge. For a more developed discussion on QA in HE, see section 3.3.3.

Kostova (1999) in her research about strategic organizational practices makes an observation that such practices “are meaning and value based, as well as knowledge based” (pp. 310-311). The same holds true for quality practices in HE (see Krause, 2012). Value basis of practices indicates that they are part of organizational culture. The concept of quality and practices are the ingredients of an organizational culture of quality, which relies on normative and cultural-cognitive frameworks of organizing, while regulative forces have considerable influence on the development of quality practices. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) differentiates four ‘ideal-type’ quality cultures in a higher education context: responsive, reactive, regenerative and reproductive. The typology is based on the intensity of external rules and the strength of the organizational actors’ control. As the scholar notes, these are just two potential dimensions dichotomized for the purpose of simplicity.

Research on quality culture in HE affirms the contested nature of quality, the tension between the need to comply to external quality requirements, accountability and assurance of quality on the one hand and the internal institutional values and everyday practices on the other. Below I provide a few accounts that further illustrate these tensions. For instance, Vlasceanu *et al.* (2004) define quality culture as

a set of shared, accepted, and integrated patterns of quality to be found in the organizational cultures and the management systems of institutions. Awareness of and commitment to the quality of higher education, in conjunction with a solid culture of evidence and with the efficient management of this quality (through quality assurance procedures) are the ingredients of quality culture. (pp. 50-51)

Whereas, Harvey (2009) notes that

quality culture is poorly understood and often implicitly construed as embodying a system of internal quality monitoring. However, a set of bureaucratic procedures is not the same as a quality culture. Most internal processes do not exhibit the characteristics of a lived culture, rather they reflect the rules and expectations of an ‘audit culture’. They are fundamentally distrustful and constrained by an externally imposed or oriented framework of thinking. (p. 5)

For Harvey externally oriented thinking and organizing, especially when driven by monitoring and auditing, does not reflect quality culture. One way to reconcile the opposing views is offered by Gvaramadze (2008), who asserts that it is the enhancement approach that “links internal quality culture (autonomy, transparency and effectiveness) to external quality mechanisms” (p. 452). Similarly, in the EUA (2006b) perspective, quality culture is an internal organizational culture with permanent enhancement mechanisms at two levels: institutional and individual. At the institutional level, these are structural and managerial elements. Quality is seen as an enhancement process; whereas at the individual and the staff level, it refers to the transformation process through shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality culture. Bendermacher *et al.* (2017), by conducting a review of existing empirical literature on quality culture developments in HE, attempted to identify the following: organisational context elements inhibiting and promoting a development of quality culture, its working mechanisms and associated outcomes. The authors concluded that quality culture “can assume various shapes” (p. 53), that it is dependent on organizational subcultures. The results of the review (for more details see section 3.3.3) also confirmed Harvey and Stensaker (2008) view that a quality culture is a complex, socially constructed phenomenon which can not be seen in isolation from the specific context in which

it is embedded, external pressures and the idea that quality practices may not be easily transferrable from one context to another.

### *2.1.3. Implications for the study*

Based on the above review, *quality in HE may thus be treated as a multifaceted, value-laden, stakeholder and context relative phenomenon*. A variety of quality concepts and definitions of quality culture circulating in HE confirms the plurality of logics guiding quality related activities. It also explicates the ongoing tension between accountability to external constituents of HEIs (e.g., governments, granting agencies and foundations) on the one hand, and organizational learning and enhancement on the other (Krause, 2012). I share a concept of quality with higher education researchers who claim that quality in higher education is a process, not a status quo, something people do (a verb) rather than a state of being (a noun) (Freed, Klugman and Fife, 1997; Chaffee and Sherr, 1992). Quality, therefore, can be defined as “an orientation and a philosophy focused on action” (Freed, Klugman and Fife, 1997, p. 24). Also, I observe that quality is relational, both conceptually and operationally. Quality related activities of HEIs are embedded in the organizational quality culture and strategic practices as well as guided by institutional quality logics and practice.

Although I am interested in whether JP quality developments are improvement led, I have to be sensitive to the following. First, I recognize the existing contestation over various definitions of quality, actors’ meanings and interpretations of quality and their intentions regarding quality work. Second, quality practices might bring about both intended and unintended consequences. Third, in order to reconcile and theorize some of the tensions mentioned earlier, it is essential for researchers to go beyond formal definitions of quality to situated meanings of quality, encompassing interpretations by organizational members, and enactments of various stakeholders’ demands and priorities.

### III. THEORETICAL ROADMAP

This chapter contains a review of the theoretical framework guiding the study: institutional work approach within institutional theory. It also includes reflections on a preliminary literature review which was carried out following Blumer's (1954) advice to begin the induction with guidance of "sensitizing concepts" (in Johnson, 2008, p. 113). Certain concepts, perspectives and theoretical frameworks have been viewed as guides "for uncovering empirical variation in the phenomenon of interest" (ibid.) and for the design of the project. Also included below are some initial theoretical explorations which have helped me to discern what approach would be the most feasible for the research questions at hand.

I have considered Giddens' (1984) framework of analysis because it, according to Pozzebon (2008), "avoids the historical division between determinist and voluntarist views, and ...helps to bridge micro- and macro-levels of analysis" (p. 215). For Giddens, "social structure is both the medium for and the consequence of action and agency" (Van Dijk *et al.*, 2011, p. 1488). According to his theory of structuration, by focusing our analysis on social practices, we may best explain how "agency and structure are created and sustained" (Pozzebon, p. 215). Another approach has been suggested by Naidoo *et al.* (2011) who have made an observation that "Bourdieu's work on higher education as a specific institutional site, particularly his concepts of 'field', 'capital', and 'habitus' makes an important contribution to understanding the dynamics of practice within higher education institutions" (p. 1146). A field in Bourdieu's (1977) terms is a dynamic field of forces within which the agents who have a stake in the vision and operation of the field will occupy objective positions or/and alter the distribution and weight of capital with the aim to either conserve or transform the relations of forces within the structure that is constitutive of the field. In the context of this study, HE systems are considered to be fields. Frølich *et al.* (2013) note that HE in Europe can be regarded either as an organizational field or a set of organizational fields. By setting certain rules, the state plays an important role in the composition of the field (e.g. the binary systems composed of different HEIs) providing "possible templates, models or identities" (ibid., p. 90). HEIs by adopting certain identities compete for government funding, accumulate capital and either conserve or transform the relations in the fields. Attention to the institutional field in this study is important as it provides explanatory power about the totality and the interdependence of relevant actors. As further noted by Naidoo *et al.* (2011) "the institutional field perspective is a useful frame, as it provides an analytical perspective and a mediating context linking the university to the external



environment. It also provides a relational approach which focuses on interactive processes between and within universities” (p. 1146). However, according to Bourdieu, it is not the external forces that are shaping the field and providing its patterns, but habitus, a mental or cognitive system of structures. In academic life, habitus is strongly linked with disciplines, its community of experts. Such communities through ideas, cognitive structures and experience develop “the language in which individuals understand themselves and interpret their world” (Henkel, 2005, p. 157). Members of communities are “also introduced to the myths through which deeply held values and beliefs of the community are expressed” (Bailey, 1977; Vabø, 2002 in *ibid.*). Naidoo *et al.* (2011) assert that the operation of a general academic habitus with deeply ingrained rules, values and professional protocols across different national contexts and time periods has been confirmed by empirical studies (cf. Henkel, 2000; Naidoo, 2000). For instance, autonomy, academic, and scientific capital are valued in academic life; it is prescribed who can legitimately become a student and an academic; who teaches within particular programmes within particular institutions, what formal qualifications are required; what research and teaching experience are required; and, where and how learning takes place. Habitus is explained further in section 3.2.1.

Bourdieu’s ‘social field’ notion has become one of the key theoretical constructs in institutional theory. Bourdieu’s work on habitus as well as Giddens’ structuration ideas may be traced in one of the more recent strands of institutional theory, called institutional work (IW). In light of the above and in relation to my interest in how quality ideas and practices are adopted and enacted in higher education which is considered to be highly institutionalized (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Naidoo, 2000; Kraatz and Moore, 2002), I find it plausible to turn attention to the underpinnings of institutional theory.

According to neo-institutional theory, organizations are affected by their institutional environments, or ‘organizational fields’, as well as other factors. Other fields and broader social contexts also exert certain influence (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Scott (2008a) similarly argued that organizations “are affected not only by local but by distant actors and forces” (p. 435). The relational perspective of organizations embedded in the ‘fields’ and the role of social forces on organizational action and decision making brings together micro-meso-macro levels. Such a perspective has a strong explanatory power for the phenomenon under study, namely the adoption of quality ideas and their enactment in joint programmes (JPs) in the context of cross-border collaborative engagement among HEIs. Therefore, the analysis of quality in JPs, needs to include not only the study of institutional demands for quality emanating from the environment (macro level),

but also organizational practices of how HEI's run JPs (meso level) originating from the everyday work of HE staff (micro level).

JPs are part of the higher education internationalization agenda, while international activities are exposed to the global higher education environment and interdependent transnational as well as national policies (Saarinen and Ursin, 2012). Enders (2004) makes an observation that the developments of European-wide policies in the EHEA “resulted in the emergence of a multi-level and multi-actor context within which higher education organisations operate and develop themselves [and] their international activities” (p. 375). Levitt and Scott (2004) assert that organizations forming joint ventures to work on common projects with foreign partners become “subject to multiple, possible conflicting, layers of cultural, regulative, and normative prescriptions” (p. 25) and that institutional theory is the right approach to confront issues arising in organizations engaged internationally. I thus proceed to review main ideas and major developments as well as certain criticisms of institutional theory. I also pay attention to the theorization of practices, especially the contributions of the latter to a more recent strand of IW in institutional theory.

### **3.1. The roots of institutional work concept**

In this section, I proceed with the theoretical grounding for this study. I introduce institutional work (IW) primarily drawing from two scholarship streams: institutional theory and practice studies. The decision to look at these particular research streams has been guided by Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) observation that the foundation of IW is built on the tenets of institutionalism and “research in the tradition of and inspired by sociology of practice (Bourdieu 1977; 1993; de Certeau 1994; Giddens 1984; Lave and Wenger, 1991)” (p. 218). In addition, as the literature into quality of HE suggests (e.g., Newton, 2010; Harvey and Williams, 2012b), although the phenomenon of quality is subject to the highly institutionalized environment of HE, quality developments and their impact can best be understood when studied through the situated practices of organizational actors. In the second half of the section, conceptual and empirical studies employing an IW perspective will be reviewed in order to trace recent theoretical developments and develop a theoretical framework which will guide the study.

### 3.1.1. Core constructs of institutionalism: institution, field, legitimacy, institutional pressures

Scholars of institutionalism, e.g., Greenwood *et al.* (2008), Heugens and Lander (2009) in their meta-analytic review of institutional theory developments and debates, affirm that institutional theory is a leading perspective in organisational analysis. Scott (2008a) noted that the major developments of the theory which have been attributed to neo-institutionalism were advanced by Meyer and Rowan in 1977. One of the main arguments carried forward was that

formal organizational structure reflected not only technological imperatives (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Thompson 1967/2003) and resource dependencies (Pfeffer 1972; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) but “institutional” forces, vaguely defined at that time as “rulelike” frameworks, “rational myths” and “knowledge legitimated through educational systems, by social prestige, by the laws... and the courts”. (ibid., p. 427)

Institutional theorists posited that formal organizational structures, e.g., offices and subunits, written rules and policies:

can become invested with social significance—interpreted and accepted as “normal” parts of rationally designed, well-run organizations. Under these conditions, the adoption and maintenance of formal structures can be explained by decision makers’ unquestioning acceptance of common beliefs about the structures’ utility, or by pressures from key resource providers such as customers, suppliers, and investors. (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983 cited by Tolbert, David and Sine, 2011, p. 1334)

Thus, *institutions* could be referred to as commonly held beliefs and understandings about ‘proper’ organizational structures and practices emanating from an institutional environment. Institutional scholars have employed Bourdieu’s notions of ‘field’ and ‘habitus’ (see also section 3.2.1) in order “to conceptualize the interactions [and actions] that exist between individuals or organizations and the institutional context in which they are embedded” (Battilana, 2006, p. 655). Bourdieu’s ‘social field’ notion has become one of the key theoretical constructs in institutional theory. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) developed the concept of *organizational field* “to depict a group of organizations within a common institutional framework held together by regulation, cognitive belief systems, and normative rules...which compete for legitimacy and resources” (Naidoo, Avi and Ekant, 2011, p. 1146). Scholars defined an organizational field as follows: “... those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory

agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 148).

In the early stages of theory development, a rather deterministic, top-down relationship between institutional fields and organizational structures was observed, assuming uniformity within institutional environments (Scott, 2008a). Institutional theory focused on the institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and ‘legal formalism’ (Scott, 2008a) which were the outcomes of seeking legitimacy. Institutional isomorphism studied by Mizuchi and Fein (1999) was described as a deliberate action of organizations to create similarity in organizational structures and strategies in order to reap acceptance and legitimacy in the eyes of cultural and political authorities. *Legitimacy* has become one of the central tenets of institutionalism. Suchman (1995) describes it as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574).

In neo-institutional accounts organizations were portrayed to be concerned with social stability, and the re-production of institutions driven by *coercive, normative and mimetic* processes (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Scott (2008b) elaborated on these processes by describing them as *regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive*. Institutional forces such as “governmental regulations have traditionally been depicted as forms of coercive power, imposing conformity on affected actors, whether individual or collective” (Scott, 2008a, p. 430) as well as securing and maintaining legitimacy. The regulative elements would include “the formal machinery of governance: laws, rules, surveillance machinery, sanctions and incentives” (Javernick-Will and Scott, 2010, p. 547). Whereas regulative elements “stress rule-setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities” (Scott, 2008a, p. 428), normative ones “introduce a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension into social life” (morally obliged to do so) (Scott, 2008b, p. 54). This category:

stresses shared values and norms, interpersonal expectations, and valued identities. The corporate culture of participating companies, conventional professional roles, and work practices enforced by occupational communities, professional standards, and state-of-the-art practices are salient examples of normative elements at work in international projects. (Javernick-Will and Scott, 2010, p. 547)

The third element, called cultural-cognitive, emphasizes the “shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made” (Scott, 2008b, p. 57). These include:

widely shared beliefs about the nature of the world (cultural frames and scripts) (Schank and Abelson 1977) and cause effect relations (institutional logics). The beliefs are “cultural” because they are widely shared, socially constructed symbolic representations; they are “cognitive” because they provide vital templates for framing individual perceptions and decisions. (Javernick-Will and Scott, 2010, p. 547)

According to Scott (2008a), cultural cognitive frameworks provide deeper foundations for institutional forms and logics; “...they provide the infrastructure on which not only beliefs, but norms and rules rest” (p. 429). These rules, norms, and meanings “arise in interaction, and they are preserved and modified by the behavior of social actors” (Giddens, 1979; Sewell, 1992 in *ibid.*). These types of knowledge rely on preconscious, taken-for-granted, and shared understandings that represent the nature of social reality. As a result, this knowledge is often tacit, although some ideas and beliefs can be quite explicit. Whereas normative knowledge is morally governed and regulative knowledge is legally sanctioned, cultural-cognitive behavior occurs because other types of behavior would be inconceivable and unrecognizable (Scott, 2001).

Neo-institutional scholars argued that an adoption of “formal structures might have only a small (or even possibly a negative) relation to operating efficiency” (Tolbert, David and Sine, 2011, p. 1334). According to Scott (2008a), DiMaggio and Powell “juxtaposed conformity pressures among organizations based on competitive processes with those stemming from institutional pressures” (pp. 435-436). Competitive isomorphism referred to the idea “that organizations operating in the same competitive space tend to become more homogenous over time, as market competition weeds out less efficient architectures in favor of more efficient ones” (Scott, 2001 cited by Heugens and Lander, 2009, p. 77). The institutional pressures “were alleged to ‘make organizations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient’” (Scott, 2008a, p. 436).

### *3.1.2. Criticism of institutional theory and further developments*

One of the critiques and weaknesses of neo-institutional theory, especially relating to the essence of institutional arguments focusing their attention on social stability through such social reproductive processes (coercive, normative, and mimetic described by DiMaggio and Powell and later elaborated by Scott) as regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive can be attributed to a somewhat simplistic and one-sided view of organizations and organizing as [becoming] identical. Such critique can be based on the argument that while neo-institutional theory accounts offered explanations on the processes of homogeneity in very much detail, it failed

to explain heterogeneity. DiMaggio and Powell themselves back in 1983 made an observation, that “organizations might be extremely homogeneous on some dimensions and yet highly diverse on others” (p. 156).

Another criticism of neo-institutionalism could be related to the fact that explanations of collective action, its reproduction, change and diffusion of practices, primarily focused on the relationship of institutions within their fields at a macro-level while the environment may not encompass what is going on at a micro-level, at the agency level, the details of people’s behaviour in organizations, their day-to-day-activities. Organizations are not just structures; they are about people, their interactions and actions. Moreover, as acutely observed by Boden (1994), “what looks - from outside - like behavior controlled by rules and norms is actually a delicate and dynamic series of interactionally located adjustments” (p. 42). Thus, it is important to make a distinction between saying and acting, or ideas and actions. Claims of acceptance of similar structures and practices may not mean that things are getting done the same way. By explaining how institutions work, we should be particularly aware of the human factor and the role of interpretations and adaptations or enactment. However, a central assumption of organizational institutionalism related to agency was of “actors so embedded in their institutional environments that extant arrangements are ‘taken-for-granted’ and actors cannot cognitively conceive of alternate arrangements” (Suddaby and Viale, 2011, p. 425). Only recently, institutional scholars started paying attention to the processes through which actors affect the institutional arrangements within which they operate.

In order to address theoretical shortcomings, in 1988, DiMaggio proposed that the role of agency, either individual or collective, power and politics of individuals in the institutionalization needs examination (DiMaggio, 1988). “Since the 1990’s the central focus of institutionalism has shifted from explaining stability to explaining change” (Berman, 2012, p. 261). “The ways and extent to which organizations responded to institutional pressure” (Scott, 2008a, p. 432) became objects of study for neo-institutionalist scholars. For instance, Oliver (1991) explored the extent to which such “requirements as e.g., coercive power of regulations ‘are subject to interpretation, manipulation, revision, and elaboration by those subject to them’” (in Scott, 2008a, p. 430). Institutional studies find that the elements of social order, referred to earlier, vary among organizations, are dependent on the institutional environments, and might be reinforced in different times. According to Scott, “this implies a transmutation over time of regulative into normative and cultural-cognitive elements” (ibid., p. 431). Conformity, as one of the institutional effects, has been observed on a continuum from ceremonial or symbolic to substantive. For

instance, decoupling has been identified as a form of ceremonial conformity. Whereas symbolic conformity means “the extent to which organizations generate positive social evaluations” (Heugens and Lander, 2009, p. 68) by adjusting to institutional norms, e.g. state or professional association templates of organizing, substantive conformity is seen as “the extent to which organizations generate accounting-based profits or increase their overall market value” (ibid.) following institutional ordinances, e.g. strategies that are rational and appropriate widely. The meta-analytic evidence presented in Heugens and Lander (2009) confirms that the adoption of isomorphic templates for organizing has a positive relationship on the organization’s symbolic and substantive performance. Such evidence has challenged the assumption that isomorphic templates of organizing provides legitimacy but not necessarily improved performance.

Critics of institutionalism (cf. Peters, 2000; Child, 1972) argued that organizations are not only capable of adapting to changes, creating internal structures by choosing which structures to adopt to fulfil their goals, and coping with the environment but, more importantly, organizations can mold the environment. In order to further address one of the major weaknesses of the theory, namely the role of actors or agents in the processes of institutionalization and organizational change, researchers shifted the focus from convergent change and stability to endogenous change and institutional entrepreneurship. Studies in institutional entrepreneurship defined as “the activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004, p. 657) put a much more explicit focus on agency and the identification of “strategies used by actors to change institutional arrangements” (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2009b, p. 5). While “the discourse of institutional entrepreneurship has helped to redirect neo-institutional analysis toward the study of actors in their role in catalyzing institutional change” (Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007, p. 1006), it has still attracted criticism, in particular related to the classical debate on structure and agency. The tension between institutional determinism and free-will of agency has often been referred as the “paradox of embedded agency” (Holm, 1995). How can organizations or individuals innovate if their beliefs and actions, intentions and rationality “are all conditioned by the very institution they wish to change?” (p. 398). The scholar has argued that the paradox can be solved if institutions are seen as “nested systems, that is, interconnected, multi-level systems in which each action-level or arena simultaneously is a framework for action and a product of action” (ibid.).

The advancement of the institutional logic concept (see section 3.3 for a more elaborate discussion) as well as more recent institutional theory developments on institutional work provide a link between institutions and actions. These theoretical developments deepen our understanding of the variations in organizational practices and beliefs inherent in institutions as well as of the potential for human agency. *Institutional logic* was introduced by Alford and Friedland (1985) to refer to "broader cultural beliefs and rules that structure cognition and guide decision making in a field" (cited by Lounsbury, 2007, p. 289), thus defining "the content and meaning of institutions" (in Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, p. 100). Researchers posited that organizational activities are influenced not just by institutional environments or organizational fields but also by other fields and broader social contexts (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Scott, 2008b). Thornton and Ocasio (1999) in their approach to institutional logics have extended the theorization of coercive, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional pressures by highlighting their complementarity (in Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, p. 101). Moreover, some organizational fields may not necessarily be characterized by one central, relatively coherent set of beliefs, but rather organizational fields may contain secondary or multiple conflicting belief systems; hence, activities of some organizations are embedded in institutional pluralism (e.g., Dunn and Jones, 2010). As literature in HE quality illustrates, the latter is of particular importance to this study. Institutional scholars argue that the context of institutional pluralism serves as an enabling condition for human agency (e.g. Rojas, 2010) and institutional change (e.g., Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012).

### **3.2. Constitutive elements of practices**

As noted above, institutional theory and, in particular, its strand on IW has been influenced by theoretical underpinnings of practices. Drawing on practice scholarship, I hereby briefly discuss the constitutive elements of practices and their implications for understanding and studying institutional work.

#### *3.2.1. Concept and nature of practices*

The genealogy of organizational practice may be traced to the writings of philosophers, sociologists and cultural theorists like Aristotle, Wittgenstein (1953), Heidegger (1962), Weber (1978), Bourdieu (1990; 1977), Leotard (1979), Foucault (1980), Giddens (1984) and Garfinkel (1967), who contributed to the conceptualization of practices in unique ways, highlighting their particular aspects. More recent theoretical developments among other scholars have been advanced by Fairclough (2003), Orlikowski (2002), and Schatzki *et al.* (2001). Having such a



rich historical background, contemporary empirical studies use various definitions of practices. For example, Vaara and Whittington (2012) in their review of strategy as practice (SAP) studies offered a broad definition of practices as “accepted ways of doing things, embodied and materially mediated, that are shared between actors and routinized over time (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001)” (p. 287). A social, taken-for-granted, and repetitive nature of practices is emphasized in this definition. Barnes (2001) calls practices a collective action, “recognized forms of activity” (p. 19) guiding “the behavior according to the situation” (Goffman, 1959; Pentland and Reuter, 1994 cited by Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010, p. 192). Practices are thus, “not simply what people do, but the socially legitimate routines in any given community” (Barnes, 2001; Schatzki, 2001 cited by Phillips and Lawrence, 2012). Both situated and institutionalized nature of practices is emphasized in latter conceptualizations.

Bourdieu (1977) argues that it is habitus, a mental or cognitive system of structures, a collective phenomenon and socially constructed behavior provides patterns of practices. Habitus in Bourdieu’s terms is defined “as temporally durable dispositions, embodied unconsciously and predisposed to function as frameworks that generate and regulate practices and ideas” (Bourdieu, 1977 in Battilana, 2006, pp. 655-656). Habitus is an internalized embodiment of external social structures that are acquired over time. It is a structure through which we produce our thoughts and actions which in turn create external social structures. Habitus constrains, but does not determine what a person should think or how they should act. It only suggests. Agents will act on the basis of practical sense or fuzzy logic, not formal logic. They will react reasonably in given situations. When habitus matches the field in which it evolved, agents act instantaneously and intuitively. Both Bourdieu (1990) as well as Giddens (1979) argue that “subject (agency) and object (structure and society) are entwined” (cited by Cunliffe, 2011, p. 652).

Battilana (2006) noted that some neo-institutional scholars, (cf. DiMaggio, 1979) have criticized the notion of habitus for being ambiguous and “for leaving almost no room for agency, and thereby for social change (Sewell, 1992; Fowler, 1997; Boyer, 2003; Mutch, 2003)” (p. 656). While reading Jenkins’s (2002) interpretation of Bourdieu’s work, I have made an observation that although Bourdieu talks about practices as taken-for-granted, he rejects the duality of their nature. In Bourdieu’s theorization, practices are neither wholly conscious nor wholly unconscious, neither based on rules, recipes nor on normative models (Jenkins, 2002). They are improvisatory, temporal, and adaptive, influenced by environment, time and space. Similarly, Antonacopoulou (2008) views practices as dynamic, fluid and relational. According to the scholar, practice can be conceptualized as “a flow of connections

between multiple dimensions that define the workings of a social group in relation to wider contextual forces that shape interpretations and reconstructions of reality” (ibid., p. 168).

### 3.2.2. *Knowing, meaning and values*

More recent scholarly accounts of practices built on Bourdieu’s conceptualization, describe them as *a way of knowing and doing* (Gherardi, 2001). Cook and Brown (1999) describe practice as action informed by meaning drawn from a particular group context (p. 390 in Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010 p. 269). In line with these theorizations, I have earlier quote Kostova (1999) claiming that practices “are meaning and value-based, as well as knowledge based” (pp. 310-311).

A very general conception of values represents enduring beliefs or ideals shared by members of communities about what is important, good, or bad in a variety of situations. Values are the foundation for decisions and actions. They are constitutive elements of knowing and doing. In a neo-institutional perspective they are guiding what is ‘appropriate’ and/or legitimate. Both values and meaning are embedded in cultural-cognitive and normative frameworks guiding actions described above in section 3.1.1. While meaning is embodied in practices, it may not be known directly. Therefore, as Hatch and Yanow (2003) suggest, in order to capture the meaning (values, beliefs, feelings of lived experience) we have to study the artifacts that embody meaning (p. 66). Gabriel (2008) makes an observation that in order

to understand the meaning of a word, an interaction, or an event, we use definitions, interpretations or negotiations. All three require making sense of actors, networks, interactions, situations, contexts, and flows of events. They require sensemaking within culturally relevant framework, and they are part of social construction of reality. (p. 173)

In relation to the knowledge basis of practices, I will briefly review the nature of organizational knowledge. Organization scholars define knowledge as a mix of experience, values, contextual information, and insight (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p. 5). Others use a more abstract definition such as “the converse of uncertainty” (Buckley and Carter, 2004, p. 372). Knowledge can be tacit or explicit (Polanyi, 1962); declarative or procedural (Anderson, 1993, cited by Schwandt, 2005 p. 179). In organizational settings, various forms of knowledge are observed: situated, encoded, embrained, and enculturated. However, all knowledge is rooted in tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1962) and “embodied in individual cognition and

organization routines” (Inkpen and Dinur, 1998, p. 456). “The nature of knowledge is no longer considered singular; it varies from the concrete instrumental or technical to the understanding of underlying subjective assumptions and premises associated with social norms and the cultural context of actions” (communicative and emancipatory) (Schwandt, 2005, p. 181). Nonaka and his associates “developed an influential organizational knowledge creation theory” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 151) that describes knowledge as dynamic and fluid. More recently in Nonaka’s and his colleagues’ work, knowledge is also described as meaningful, contextual, and relational (Swart *et al.*, 2009, p. 329). Argote and Ingram (2000, p. 153) contend that knowledge is embedded in the interactions of people, tools, and tasks. In Gergen’s (1991, p. 270) view, it “is not something that people possess in their heads, but rather, something that people do together” (in Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000, p. 330). Thus, for practice scholars it is “a form of a distributed social expertise: that is, knowledge-in-practice” (*ibid.*) situated and manufactured in the historical, socio-material, cultural and at the same time structural context in which it occurs (*ibid.*; Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010).

Practice scholars contend that organizational knowledge is “acquired through some form of participation in a community of practice” (Gherardi, 2000, p. 330). Sharing knowledge about practices and situated learning are considered to be among key activities in communities of practice (CoP) which lead to the improved performance of organizations (Lesser and Storck, 2001; Wenger, 2006). A critique of scholarship on CoP led to a recent shift in the focus of this research stream from CoP to practices of communities. My observation is that in the HE sector the number of communities is rapidly growing. Those are networks bringing together HEIs, professional and academic associations in certain disciplines, e.g., engineering (ENAAE), chemistry (ECTNA), geography (HERODOT) or like the Joint Degree Management and Administration Network (JOIMAN) that focuses on sharing managerial and administrative practices of collaborative degrees.

A ‘practice lens’ enables a researcher to explain the phenomenon at hand by investigating empirically “how contextual elements shape knowledge and how competence is built around a contingent logic of action” (Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010, p. 267). Actions, activities, modes of knowing or language and symbols and the inherent tensions produced by practices, e.g. a contradiction between intention and action have all been the focus of practice-centred research (Antonacopoulou, 2008). Smets *et al.* (2012) argue that “the practice perspective helps institutional theorists refine explanations of endogenous change and develop a much-needed multi-level understanding of individual human agency in highly institutionalized arenas” (p. 900).

### 3.3. Institutional work

More recent institutional accounts, in particular those of institutional work, question the stability and durability of institutions. Such institutional life cycles as creation, maintenance and disruption are observed. IW scholars (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011) note that institutional theorization of certain key processes and constructs, such as institutionalization, institutional change, and logics, “have focused on the macrodynamics of fields... [neglecting the] experience of organizational actors, especially the connection between this lived experience and the institutions that structure and are structured by it” (p. 52). On the one hand, researchers recognize a [more or less] conscious action, awareness, skills, creativity, and reflexivity of organizational actors, while on the other hand, researchers acknowledge their (both actors’ and their actions’) embeddedness in institutionalized environments. In this way, IW studies attempt to look “more closely at how institutions work at a local level... [by identifying] mechanisms and processes through which institutions and their logics are locally instantiated and sometimes changed” (Berman, 2012, p. 262). The role of agency in how institutions are created, maintained, how they change, transform and/or become deinstitutionalized become of primary importance.

Lawrence *et al.* (2011) assert that the distinctiveness of IW as a field of studies lies in its potential contribution to bring the agency back into institutional studies and also re-examine the relationship between agency and institution. Such theorization shifts the focus of attention in institutional theory from the view of individual and organizational actions as linear, primarily driven by institutional pressures, to a *recursive relationship* of institutions and actions, and more importantly how actions affect institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2009). Therefore, IW scholars (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010) guide researchers to study actors’ day-to-day activities, their engagement in routines as well their [actors’] *efforts to affect* [emphasis added] (p. 190) either institutionalization, a reproduction (maintenance) of taken-for-granted practices or recognition and acceptance of new ones. IW studies thus need to focus on the interplay of intention, action, and outcomes in organizations. As Phillips and Lawrence (2012) observe, “it leads us to consider what organizational actors are doing, why they are doing it and with what consequences” (p. 228).

The object of analysis in IW studies, as suggested by Lawrence and his colleagues, should be on ‘lived experiences’ of individuals, conditions, and forms of actions, as well as on a variety of strategies used by actors in the work of disrupting, creating and maintaining institutions. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) assert that the

following aspects should be central to the study of IW: 1) awareness, skill, and reflexivity of individual and collective actors; 2) their more or less conscious action; and 3) action as practice occurring within sets of institutionalized rules. As the extant review of IW literature shows, studies primarily focus on the role of agency in institutional life cycle processes and a variety of mechanisms, actions, activities, practices actors undertake. Very broadly, empirical IW studies involve:

- a) a variety of actors or ‘institutional workers’, their characteristics, qualities, and roles: individuals, groups (from elite, professional communities to marginal groups), and organizations, professionals, e.g. lawyers and accountants, entrepreneurs, leaders of institutions, community organizers, industry executives, high-profile academics, regulators, etc.;
- b) heterogeneous agency, its dimensions (projective, iterative, practical-evaluative) as well as processes of emergence (e.g. reflexivity, awareness and participation);
- c) individual (micro), organizational (meso) and field-level (macro) elements or conditions that enable and/or constrain certain actions and practices and consequentially, agency;
- d) actions, activities, practices, and strategies of human agents (individuals and organizations) as well as associated processes and mechanisms leading to IW.

The IW concept has been introduced in order to highlight “the middle ground of agency” (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2009, p. 6). Scholars assert that IW “avoids depicting actors either as “cultural dopes” trapped by the institutional arrangements, or as hypermuscular institutional entrepreneurs” (p.1). Institutional entrepreneurship studies (referred to in section 3.2.1) provided accounts of agency as an endogenous mechanism in the process of creating and transforming institutions. Although such a process is treated as one type of IW, some scholars distinguish institutional entrepreneurship from IW. For instance, Willmott (2011) argues that while IW places emphasis on mundane practices, institutional entrepreneurship focuses on more abstract activities. Also, earlier institutional entrepreneurship studies primarily reported institutional change as the major outcome of actors’ activities (Dorado, 2005; Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2009a; Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004; Phillips, Tracey and Karra, 2009). More recent accounts of entrepreneurship report varied institutional life cycles (e.g., Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen and Van de Ven, 2009; Weik, 2011). Both IW and institutional entrepreneurship studies explicate intended and unintended outcomes, as well as successful and not so successful accounts of actors’ engagement. IW

scholars posit that consequences arising from certain actions may vary from the intended ones. The explanation of such a disconnect could partially be explained by heterogeneous agency which I describe below.

### *3.3.1. Agency, its dimensions, enabling and constraining conditions*

The conceptualization of multidimensional actors' agency in the institutional literature is drawn from the works of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) who treat agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement. They identify three dimensions of agency: iterative or habitual agency (informed by the past), practical-evaluative agency (focused on the present), and projective or strategic agency (oriented toward the future). Incorporating these dimensions of agency in the analysis of embedded agency, Batillana and D'Aunno (2009) show that IW may involve a wide range of levels of self-consciousness and reflexivity, as well as a wide range of temporal orientations. In Giddens' (1984) view "social structure is both the medium for and the consequence of action and agency" (in Van Dijk *et al.*, 2011, p. 1488). Giddens' ideas and the empirical account of Van Dijk and his colleagues offer a couple of insights that I find illuminating. First, actors' agency is enabled by their embeddedness. Second, institutional conditions are not determinants of behaviour, but must be enacted. Reflexivity is seen as "a precondition for agency within social systems. People continually monitor actions while reflecting on their consequences, thus allowing for deliberate choice and agency" (de Rond, 2003; Giddens, 1984 in Van Dijk *et al.*, 2011, pp. 1488-1489). Similarly, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that "agency is always a dialogical process by and through which actors immersed in temporal passage engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action" (p. 974).

#### *3.3.1.1. Intentionality and reflexivity of human behavior in institutional work*

Scholars of IW (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010) note that while this strand of institutional studies is consistent with general structurationist argument of action as "embedded in the social structures that it simultaneously produces, reproduces, and transforms" (p. 191), "the notion of institutional work highlights more reflexive forms of action that are aimed at intentionally affecting institutions" (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2009 in *ibid.*). Both intentionality and reflexivity of human behaviour are central to IW. These dimensions are inherent to a conscious action and thus, agency. Based on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualization of agency, referred above, Lawrence *et al.* (2009) argue that the processes of schematization (past-oriented), contextualization (present-oriented) and hypothesization (future-oriented) describe intentionality, "where actors relate their

actions to their situation” (p. 13), and particular institutional effects. The authors note that “even habitual action can be intentional, since there are always multiple habits and routines from which to choose at any given moment” (p. 12). In Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) explanation although “habitual action is claimed to be agentic, since it involves attention and effort, such activity is largely unreflective and taken for granted” (p. 973). The reproductive and transformative dimensions of social action (explicated either by routinization or problematization of experience) may, thus, be explained by processes of agency emergence (variations in reflexivity) (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

My literature search on the concept of reflexivity has also led me to the works of Cunliffe and Jun who offer a conceptual overview of the phenomenon and raise its importance in organizational practices of public administration. The authors have broadly defined reflexivity as “the need to question our natural and often taken-for-granted attitudes such as prejudice, bias, thought, and habits” (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005, p. 226). In their work, different types of reflexivity are distinguished. A more general conception is drawn from Pollner’s (1991) idea of radical reflexivity as “an ‘unsettling’, i.e. insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality” (cited by Cunliffe and Jun, 2005, p. 227). Two forms of reflexivity which, according to Cunliffe and Jun (2005) are particularly important for changing traditional ways of organizing are self-reflexivity, “a rigorous critique of habitual practices, and in critical reflexivity - questioning and complexifying his or her thinking and experience (Chia, 1996)” (p. 226).

Reflexivity is inherent to a conscious action and thus, agency. It may occur more naturally since “we are constantly constructing meaning and social realities as we interact with others and talk about our experience” (Cunliffe, 2003, p. 985). With regards to organizational practices, scholars posit that reflexivity requires a professional “to question the ends, means, and relevance of administrative practice” (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005, p. 227). ‘Institutional reflexivity’, thus, according to Moldaschl (2007) “focuses on the question, how firms keep their procedures and premises open to revisions” (p. 4). A reflexive practice enables individuals to wrestle with tensions and contradictions or, as Cunliffe suggests, paradoxical aspects, e.g., stability and flexibility, control and autonomy. By engaging in critical thinking about the impact of practices, human agents “can become more creative, responsive and open to different ways of thinking and acting” (Cunliffe and Jun 2005, p. 228), consequently offer alternative ways of thinking about practices, and in this way transforming them. In other words, reflexivity enables praxis (see section 3.3.2).

Although, according to Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), reflexivity is considered to be key to IW, I have not located many empirical studies in IW that explicitly incorporate the exploration of reflexivity. There are some institutional accounts, mostly related to institutional entrepreneurship and the creation aspect of IW that address the role of reflexivity. For example, Mutch (2007) in his case study on institutional entrepreneurship employed Archer's (2003) lens of 'autonomous reflexive', a particular form of individual's reflexivity, characterized by internal conversation. Individuals who are engaged in internal conversation, according to the scholar, do it in "relative... isolation from the concerns of others" (Mutch, 2007). Such engagement has "the potential of bringing one into conflict with, and seek to change, the structures surrounding" (ibid.) them.

Other studies offer various explanations of why, under what conditions, what kinds of actors, and with what effect actors can come to reflect upon taken-for-granted structures, the institutional logics ordering their world, organizational practices, meanings, and to consider previously unthinkable possibilities. Among these are, e.g., exogenous shocks disturbing a settled arrangement (Clemens and Cook, 1999) such as shifts in social values (Rao, Monin and Durand, 2003), regulatory policies (Edelman, 1992), and/or technological regimes (Garud, Jain and Kumaraswamy, 2002). In prior studies, the following institutional conditions were identified as conducive to human agency: contradictions (Seo and Creed, 2002) inherent in regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements of institutions; competing logics (Marquis and Lounsbury, 2007), heterogeneity (Battilana and D'Aunno, 2009), and pluralism (Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen and Van de Ven, 2009). Another common prediction is that change will arise from the 'periphery' of a field because those organizations are less advantaged and less caught by prevailing institutional arrangements (e.g., Leblebici *et al.*, 1991; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004; Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000). Based on the study of everyday work in legal services firms, Smets and his colleagues argue that "it is the encounter of novel complexity that makes practitioners reflect and step outside existing arrangements to search for new accommodations" (Smets, Morris and Greenwood, p. 892).

While the latter studies mostly refer to field-level dynamics and exogenous triggers of reflexivity, other studies focus on individual-level attributes explaining reflexivity. For instance, Zilber (2011) notes that motivation, skills and interests are tightly linked with reflexivity and therefore human agency and actions. Similarly, Fay (1996) posits that an intentional human action reflects motivations, beliefs, and goals of specific actors (in Zilber, 2011, p. 1553). Consequently, as Zilber argues, reflexive accounts would need to include the actors' motivations and intentions, their own understanding of events, and their conscious efforts in order to determine



how thoughtful, e.g., maintenance of institutional multiplicity is and how explicitly it is negotiated among actors through their actions and interactions (ibid., p. 1554). The focus on reflexivity accompanied by actors' awareness and skill, can therefore aid the understanding of endogenous mechanisms at play in IW. Mutch (2007) concludes that it is personal reflexivity and "the pursuit of projects that bring actors into conflict with established practices... [and] engender change" (p. 1137).

When examining the role of agency in IW, scholars also explore the characteristics and/or qualities of actors, how and under what circumstances actors/agents are able to effect changes, and what triggers certain actions and practices. Agency enabling and constraining conditions are examined, as well as the processes of agency emergence (e.g., reflexivity, awareness and participation), actions, activities, practices which actors engage in, strategies, and the mechanisms actors employ in everyday work. I have grouped the enabling/constraining conditions into three categories: individual-level, organizational-level and field-level. Some of the elements cross categories. For example, such elements as power, reputation, control (e.g. of resources) are attributed both to individuals as well as organizations. Status could be attributed to all three categories, whereas social networks are identified as intra-organizational as well as inter-organizational condition. For a more detailed sample list of agency enabling and constraining conditions, please see Table C-2 in Appendix C.

### *3.3.2. Action-activity-practice-praxis*

When IW scholars refer to actions, activities, and strategies leading to IW, they use terms like 'purposive action', 'action as practice' or simply practice. In IW studies as well as practice studies, researchers debate conceptual differences among action, activity, practice, and praxis. Action, as well as activity by some scholars, are considered to be interactions between actors in their daily duties and roles, the 'instantiations of practice' (Weik, 2011; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007; Jarzabkowski, 2005). Lounsbury and Crumley (2007) observe that individual actions may reproduce, vary or even counter a certain practice, but an individual action cannot establish, maintain or abolish a practice because a practice is made up of many actions. Even a very powerful individual actor, in establishing a new practice, must rely on other actors taking up (or being forced into taking up) a certain type of action.

Sminia (2011), in his study of institutional continuity, has applied Sztompka's (1991) model of social becoming where a distinction is made between practice as a potential activity, "a range of possible actions that might or might not be realized"

(p. 1562), and a realized activity or praxis. IW scholars use the term ‘practice’ widely, and as Lounsbury and Crumley (2007) note; do not always provide theoretical justification (p. 995). In many instances, however, scholars draw on practice theorists’ conceptualization (see also a discussion in section 3.2). For instance, Jarzabkowski (2005) refers to practice as “activity patterns across actors that are infused with broader meaning and provide tools for ordering social life and activity” (cited by Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007, p. 995). Dover and Lawrence (2010) draw on Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of practice as “routine, legitimate sets of skilled social behaviors” (p. 308). Such focus provides insights into processes of institutionalization, as well as the need and potential for social change. In both cases, practices are understood as “embodied, materially interwoven arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki, 2001, p. 2). My observation is that when viewed in the institutional environment, Jun’s (1998) conceptualization of praxis as “critical, conscious, socially purposive action” (p. 124) captures the central defining characteristics of the collective action in IW approach and could be treated as a form of agency. As Whittington notes, “praxis comprises the interaction between macro and micro contexts in which activity is constructed” (in Jarzabkowski, 2005, pp. 22-23). Seo and Creed (2002) also highlight the political nature of praxis. This type of agency is considered to play an important role in institutional change.

In studying ‘actions as practices’ that create, sustain and disrupt institutions, IW scholars identify various strategies and activities, e.g., rhetoric and argumentation, power exercise, forming alliances, mobilizing resources, producing and constructing identity. For a more detailed sample list of activities, actions, strategies, practices, mechanisms, and processes please see Tables C-1 and C-2 in Appendix C. The tables provide a summary of extant empirical studies’ review, conceptual and meta-analytical reviews of IW studies published in over twenty academic journals as well as other publications such as handbooks and books over the period of the last fifteen years. The majority of reviewed IW studies have been published in such journals as *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organization Studies*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization*, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, also in Lawrence *et al.* (2009) book *Institutional work : Actors and agency in institutional studies of organizations*.

The increased focus on agency, purposive individual and collective actions in a contested rather than stable environment equips institutional researchers to better explain not only various processes leading to IW but also a variety of outcomes such as disruption, change, adaptation, hybridization of practices, allomorphism, and innovation. The turn to agency in institutional theory opens for a variety of

research avenues related to human agency. For instance, Voronov and Vince (2012) convincingly argue to integrate the study of emotions into the analysis of institutional work in order to enhance the understanding and conceptualization of human agency beyond boundedly rational and cognitive aspects.

While some empirical studies have focused just on one category of IW, e.g. maintaining (Trank and Washington, 2009; Zilber, 2009) or creating institutions (Boxenbaum and Pedersen, 2009; Zietsma and McKnight, 2009), others (e.g., Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2009; Hirsch and Bermiss, 2009; Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen and Van de Ven, 2009) have demonstrated that IW involves a complex combination of creating, disrupting and maintaining aspects of work. Originally proposed in 2006 by Lawrence and Suddaby, research on institutional work is growing. Scholars affirm the recursive and cyclical configurations that underpin institutional work and the role of capable actors in those processes.

### 3.3.3. *Quality in higher education and institutional work*

Although empirical studies in HE quality and its practices have not necessarily explicitly employed IW perspective, nonetheless, some parallels may be drawn. Quality assurance (QA) in HE may be viewed as an institutional practice *involving a mix of IW forms* (creation, maintenance and disruption). QA is seen as a political process, heavily related to power issues and its redistribution (disruption leading to change); carrying over of certain norms via the implementation of ‘legitimate’, more or less taken-for-granted practices (maintenance); resistance to quality practices (maintenance).

*The role of agency* in the above mentioned processes is questioned by HE researchers. For example, Newton (2010) juxtaposes formal quality meanings to situated ones highlighting the need to understand the latter. He also points out that:

what had become evident to practitioners is that policy implementation is complex, and academic life and higher education institutions are unpredictable, with ambiguity often being the order of the day. It followed that managing for quality enhancement involved managing complexity and tensions, and also understanding the responses to quality of various quality constituencies. (pp. 52-53)

Newton not only highlights the political aspects of quality but also raises the question that is at the core of the embedded agency paradox: “Are quality managers and leaders ‘change heroes’ or ‘passive victims?’” (p. 53). An IW perspective helps us to understand that quality related activities in HE might range from largely unreflexive, taken-for-granted ways of approaching quality issues, to

more conscious efforts driven by organizational actors' awareness of the situation at hand, certain motivations and intentions as well as the use of available resources and skills. Bendermacher *et al.* (2017) in their study on the developments of quality culture in HEIs concluded that leaders of organizations are "central drivers to quality culture development by affecting the allocation of resources, clarification of roles and responsibilities, creation of partnerships and influencing people and process management" (p. 52).

HE researchers' findings on the impact and outcomes of 'quality schemes' correspond with the IW proposition regarding varied outcomes (e.g., intended/unintended; successful/unsuccessful). Bendermacher *et al.* (2017) concluded that human interaction (both staff and student and staff) and staff agency in quality culture developments via commitment, shared ownership, knowledge and empowerment generates positive improvements in teaching and learning, increases student and staff satisfaction. But there are instances like Hanken's (2011) study on the implementation of a taken-for-granted QA measure in the HE field, namely student evaluation of teaching in a one-to-one tuition context at a Norwegian HEI. She explicates how the prevailing logic of 'appropriateness' for the application of this particular quality tool in the HE field and the intended outcome (enhancement of teaching and learning) brings about the unintended consequence of a symbolic ritual to be performed by students. It is symbolic in a sense that students appreciate the opportunity to express their opinion and consequentially have the right to participate in their own learning process; however, for various reasons students do not always choose to participate in this way, or, even in case of completing an evaluation, are not necessarily completely open.

Stensaker (2007; 2008), in his meta-analysis of studies on QA impact and outcomes argues, that QA says little about the actual improvement of teaching and learning, which is one of the core HE functions. The author notes that "high expectations with respect to quality assurance have often been accompanied by quite mixed performance and multifaceted outcomes of the processes" (p. 4). Stensaker has grouped the most cited QA outcomes into four categories: power, professionalization, public relations and permeability. First, a re-distribution or a shift of power from academics to institutional leadership, students and other stakeholders has been observed. At the same time an increased cooperation among these groups of actors has been documented. Second, growing professionalization (particularly of quality managers) has been identified as one of the consequences arising from increased attention to quality developments. Both redistribution of power and increased professionalization could be considered as IW of disruption which undermines one of the core assumptions in HE that quality is a responsibility

of academics. The role and the involvement of institutional leadership, students and other stakeholders in quality matters are getting increased legitimation.

In the study of QA processes and their outcomes in Finnish universities, Haapakorpi's (2011) findings are similar to Stensaker's observation regarding the increased transparency, while the learning aspect could be linked to the increased professionalization. By identifying negative QA impacts, Haapakorpi links the increasing number of quality assessments to an impoverished meaning of quality and motives. Another observation made by the researcher is that when quality practices and processes become the routine (institutionalized and maintained), they begin losing relevance. Haapakorpi does not elaborate further on the relationship between the increased number of quality assessments and the impoverished quality meaning. When viewed through IW lenses, the assumption can be made that those institutionalized assessments (by becoming routines) lose relevance because they are largely unreflexive. As referred earlier, habitual actions are largely unreflexive and they are indicators of institutionalized practices, which do not necessarily lead to quality enhancement.

Wedlin's (2011) study, although not directly on HE quality, is an illustration of how an IW perspective has been applied to HE context. Wedlin has studied the institutionalization of rankings and their effect on the field of management education. She showed the efforts of agents in the field of international management education to alter perceptions of the field and preserve status and their positions through the use of rankings and the work of habitus. Wedlin has illustrated a recursive relationship of institutions and actions by showing how rankings influence organizational work practices and strategic decisions and how the latter through "the construction of new measurement systems... guided... by existing structures, positions and principles" (pp. 214-215) reinforce acceptance and institutionalization of rankings.

As the literature on quality in HE suggests (section 2.1) quality concept and practices are evolving and changing. At the same time, quality as a phenomenon is increasingly gaining legitimacy. This, however, may not necessarily mean that quality strategies and accompanying practices enacted by HEIs are homogenous or that the meaning and intentions of those practices are identical. On the contrary, the discourse of quality reveals tensions and contradictions at the structural level, whereas empirical studies on internal quality developments indicate such tensions locally. The meanings attributed to quality range from variations in formal definitions to situated, contextual ones. Empirical studies on quality developments in universities show varied organizational actors' responses to institutionalization

and change (e.g., adoption of common practices, routinization of or resistance to new practices), and unintended outcomes (e.g., redistribution of power, ritualism). The role of actors in the processes leading to such outcomes is also explicated. These findings indicate that quality developments in HE involve a mix of institutional creation, maintenance and disruption.

#### *3.3.4. Approaches employed in institutional work studies*

IW studies have employed various perspectives, e.g., integration of institutional and practice perspectives (Gherardi and Perrotta, 2011); discursive (Zilber, 2011; Schildt, Mantere and Vaara, 2011); actor network theory (e.g. Czarniawska, 2009). Gherardi and Perrotta (2011) have incorporated an institutional perspective into a primarily practice-based study, whereas Smets *et al.* (2012) in their study of institutional change integrated practice-perspective into institutional scholarship. Currie *et al.* (2012) linked IW with the sociology of professions in order to highlight the role of medical professionalism in the maintenance of dominance.

Berman (2012) notes that a growing body of institutional studies on work draws “on microsociological traditions of pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and sensemaking, among others, to identify mechanisms and processes through which institutions and their logics are locally instantiated and sometimes changed” (p. 262). Such studies show a growing interest in “looking more closely at how institutions work at the local level” (*ibid.*). IW is part of such trend. A re-direction of institutional studies from field-level processes of institutionalization and change to individual and collective action within organizations is referred to as “inhabited institutionalism” (Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Binder 2007; Hallett 2010),... a return to “microfoundations” (Powell and Colyvas 2008), ...understanding institutions as the result of “creative syncretism” (Berk and Galvan 2009)” (*ibid.*). As Powell and Colyvas (2008) posit “institutions and their underpinning logics are sustained, altered, and extinguished as they are enacted by individuals in concrete social situations” (p. 276). Reaching the same conclusion, Hallett (2010) cautioned, that “if we do not attend to how institutional myths are coupled to actual work... our knowledge of how and why institutions matter is limited” (p. 56).

#### *3.3.5. Relevance for the study*

Below I articulate the approach adopted for the study on IW of quality-related developments in transnational HE, the context of which may be defined as institutional complexity. I will proceed with a theoretical framework that is guiding the study.

In order to achieve the aims of this study, I adopted an IW approach that integrates the core concepts of institutionalism with the elements of practice theory. Such an approach has been advocated and employed in a number of conceptual and empirical studies, e.g., Gherardi and Perrotta, 2011; Lounsbury 2007; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007; Smets *et al.*, 2012; Sminia 2011. As noted earlier, the institutional theory concepts of institutional field and the overarching logics provides explanatory power about the totality and the interdependence of relevant actors and their actions. Naidoo *et al.* (2011) argue that in HE the institutional field perspective “provides an analytical perspective and a mediating context linking the university to the external environment. It also provides a relational approach which focuses on interactive processes between and within universities” (p. 1146) as well as among universities and other actors in the field. While even the local institutional environment may be fragmented and conflicting, the units of the JP case in this study (the departments running a JP) are embedded in the transnational environment, a multi-level and multi-actor context in which complementary and competing discourses of quality prevail. In this context, quality-driven activities are guided by a certain degree of pluralism in institutional logics, different legal frameworks, national quality assurance schemes, and diverse organizational quality cultures and quality interpretations. Based on the latest institutional theorization, when organizations face plural institutional logics (e.g. Greenwood *et al.*, 2011), such an institutional environment could be described as institutional complexity.

In mainstream institutional theory literature, “human agency is portrayed as primarily shaped by macroinstitutional forces, and it is largely in the presence of some exogenous shock to the system that actors are seen to shift” (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1243) “from unreflective participation in institutional reproduction to imaginative critique of existing arrangements to practical action for change” (Seo and Creed, 2002, p. 231). While such institutional theorization has helped researchers to develop explanations of institutional complexity, continuity and change emanating from the wider environment or an institutional field and driven by institutional logics, a practice lens has equipped researchers to understand that such phenomena are emerging, ongoing and changing “through people’s recurrent actions” (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, p.1240). Finding out what people regularly do and why they do it or, in other words, investigating the activities and practices in which people engage on a day-to-day basis, is thought of as providing more understanding of phenomena that are rooted in both the social as well as the individual (Sminia, 2011, p. 1563). This emphasis on work-level actions, interactions of individuals infused with values and meanings, and the understandings they reproduce and modify enables the researchers to connect

individual, organizational, and institutional levels of analysis. The insight of the practice perspective that I find relevant for the proposed study bridges institutional theorization with practice scholarship. It is stated by Schatzki (2001) and his colleagues that the practice lens focuses not just on the doing of work, but on the shared practical understanding that gives meaning to work and makes it robust. Furthermore, those shared understandings, though 'local', are informed by broader cultural frameworks, that is, by overarching institutional logics (Jarzabkowski, 2008; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007). Practices, in this sense, are the material enactments of institutional logics (Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008), and thus a set of practices, i.e. practice could be treated as a kind of institution through which IW is accomplished. In the context of this study, universities, for example, establish separate units for the evaluation of teaching and learning and/or implement various quality practices from student surveys to elaborate QA systems such as TQM (discussed in more detail in section 2.1.2.). Such practices embody contested quality prescriptions for accountability and transparency, monitoring and enhancement.

The complementarity of practice perspective allows "institutional theorists [to] refine explanations of endogenous change and develop a much needed multilevel understanding of individual human agency in highly institutionalized arenas" (Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012, p. 900). Smets and his colleagues also argue that the practice perspective "takes the institutional context of agency seriously and addresses recent critiques that much analysis has lost sight of the institutional framing of individual action and behaviour" (Delbridge and Edwards, 2008; Delmestri, 2006; Hardy and Maguire, 2008 in *ibid.*, p. 880).

In order to capture how quality is constructed and enacted among partnering institutions, attention to multiple levels of analysis is essential. This study attends to both field-level institutional logics and the dominant discourse of quality in HE field, more specifically taken-for-granted dispositions towards quality in joint degree programmes as well as organizational actors' responses to institutional pressures, their interpretation of quality through situated meanings embodied in practices. As previous empirical work suggests, in order to understand how quality practices are produced and reproduced in HE context, we need to take into account certain internal organization level factors (actors' goals and motivation for quality practices), cultural-cognitive frameworks guiding practices (values, beliefs, assumptions and norms), the influence of external pressures and other actors in the field (such as networks, professional associations and communities of practices), and the nature of the regulatory external environment including certain policies, ranking and league tables.



### 3.4. Theoretical framework

My theoretical framework is drawn from current research and debate in IW. I focus on the interplay of intentions, actions, and outcomes of quality developments, and the webs of meanings underlying quality-driven practices in the cross-border collaborative engagements of academic institutions. As Phillips and Lawrence (2012) suggest, it will allow me “to consider what organizational actors are doing, why they are doing it and with what consequences” (p. 228). I base the study on the following theoretical insights:

1. *IW is performed by skilful actors engaged in critical, conscious and socially purposive action.*

Current IW literature exposes how actors use their skills (e.g., social, political, technical) and resources (e.g., financial, symbolic, such as power granting, status) to engage in various activities (e.g., professional project, power exercise, rhetoric and argumentation strategies) that affect the social-symbolic aspect of organizations’ context (Phillips and Lawrence, 2012). The main actors in this study are higher education policy makers and professionals engaged in running a joint project (Joint Degree Programme) such as programme managers and/or personnel directly responsible for the projects as well teaching staff. Research affirms that, if the main actors are professionals (cf. Currie *et al.*, 2012; Suddaby and Viale, 2011; Schildt, Mantere and Vaara, 2011; Battilana, 2006; 2011), they use their expertise, authority over knowledge, skills, power granting resources (e.g., reputation, social networks, policies, formal offices) in IW. For example, Currie *et al.* (2012) found that professional elites exercise power in the pursuit of institutional maintenance and protection of a privileged position. Suddaby and Viale (2011) argue that professionals use their expertise, social capital, and skill to introduce nascent new rules and standards, new status hierarchy, and social order. Relying on networks (including inter-organizational) is one of the activities that enables professionals to create the rules and organizations as well as to disrupt them (cf. Rojas, 2010).

IW is intentional. It is performed by skilful actors engaged in more or less conscious actions driven by certain actors’ goals, interests, and motivation. Reflexivity is considered to be inherent to a conscious action. As empirical studies (cf. Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009) suggest, IW involves a wide range of self-consciousness and reflexivity levels. For instance, Smets *et al.* (2012) in their study of practice-driven shift in field-level logic, found that the change carried forward by organizational actors was not strategic, but not entirely unintentional either (p. 893). Social scientists (cf. Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009; Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011; Gomes, Alves and Ometto, 2012) argue that, on the one hand, the

organization/individual may be aware that one's agency ruptures a certain institutional field, but carries on with certain actions (intentionally). On the other hand, due to agency embeddedness, individual/organizational actions may have an institutional impact, but may not necessarily be perceived by actors as intentional. Researchers also point out, that although, as noted earlier, habitual actions leading to the maintenance of institutions are largely unreflexive, the maintenance of institutions may still be intentional. Heelo (2008) posits that actors may adopt an "appreciative viewpoint" (p. 81) that allows one to "acknowledge, and then through choices and conduct, ...help realize some normative order reflected in the task of upholding (an) institution and what it stands for" (p. 102). A reflexive practice, on the other hand, might enable individuals to wrestle with contradictions and tensions. Engaging in critical thinking about the impact of practices, thus could lead to the transformation of practices. Van Dijk *et al.* (2011) in their study of innovations in the institutionalized environment illustrate the importance of agents' reflexive capabilities.

This study asserts the importance of examining the intentions of actors related to JP quality developments. Is quality assurance seen as, e.g. a bureaucratic and administrative task, targeted to compliance and accountability or the improvement of academic endeavors, a combination of both or something else? How reflexive (thoughtful) quality developments are in terms of relevance to the JP and expected outcomes? Keeping in mind the nature of quality practices in HE, and my focus on meanings attached to 'doings', attention is paid to discursive elements (the language employed, whose voice is important in constructing what quality means, what practices are considered to be appropriate for a JP) and actors involved in promoting and enacting quality-driven activities (either internal stakeholders such as academic staff, administrators and/or external ones such as inter-organizational networks, professional associations). I am also interested in whether one partner HEI is perceived by others as having expertise and/or authority in the field to decide on appropriate quality instruments as opposed to collaboratively developed ones.

2. *A relationship between agency and institutions is characterized as complex and recursive.*

I adopt the concept of institutions employed by IW scholars as "(more or less) enduring elements of social life (Hughes, 1936) that affect the behavior and beliefs of individuals and collective actors by providing templates for action, cognition, and emotion (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2008b)" (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011, p. 53). All organizational actions are

embedded in the institutional arrangements and guided by regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive frameworks (see Figure 4 in Appendices). However, as researchers (cf. van Dijk *et al.*, 2011) note, agency is actually enabled by actors' embeddedness. The authors argue that "the conditions of institutional structures ...do not determine action; instead the exploitation [or enactment] of such conditions is a situated accomplishment of reflexive actors, demonstrating the vital role of agency" (p. 1487) in creation, maintenance and disruption of institutions.

IW research (e.g., Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012; Sminia, 2011; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010) empirically illustrates a complex and recursive relationship between agency and institutions. For instance, Smets *et al.* (2012), in their case study of a law firm merger between England and Germany, developed a multi-level model of a practice-driven institutional change resulting in a field-logic shift. Researchers outline the mechanisms through which change emerges through everyday work, and is justified and diffused within an organization and the field. Scholars also identify "enabling dynamics that trigger and condition these mechanisms" (*ibid.*). Van Dijk and his colleagues (2011) analysed how actors engage in innovations and overcome illegitimacy. Sminia (2011) showed how institutional continuity is achieved through the enactment of tendering practices in the Dutch construction industry and the process of 'repairing and concealing' contradiction inherent in the field. In order to examine how new practices emerge from spatially dispersed, heterogeneous activity by actors with varying kinds and levels of resources, Lounsbury and Crumley (2007) explore the creation of active money management practice in the US mutual fund industry. Their publication illustrates how institutional entrepreneurs who are "distributed across multiple dimensions such as space, status, and time but, at the same time, united by shared cultural beliefs that help define the field" (Garud, Hardy and Maguire, 2007, p. 963) engage in the creation of new practices.

In the higher education sector, Wedlin (2011) studied the institutionalization of rankings and their effect on the field of international management education. She showed the efforts of agents to alter perceptions, preserve status, and their positions in the field through the use of rankings and the work of habitus. A recursive relationship of institutions and actions has been demonstrated by showing how rankings influence organizational work practices and strategic decisions and how the latter reinforce acceptance and institutionalization of rankings through "the construction of new measurement systems... guided... by existing structures, positions and principles" (pp. 213-214).

The overview of HE quality literature suggests that:

- a. values and goals of institutions attributed to quality (in our case of JP's);
- b. legislative and regulative mechanisms, e.g., policies, regulations and guidelines;
- c. multiple discourse of quality emanating from contradictory tensions in HE policies and normative arrangements

have considerable influence on how quality is interpreted and enacted in universities. Recent policy-driven developments in the EHEA such as the ESG, EUA Guidelines for Quality Enhancement in European Joint Master Programmes are examples of regulative and normative mechanisms that might be guiding quality activities in JP's. Furthermore, as existing literature proposes (e.g. Rostan and Vaira, 2011) excellence [quality] in higher education is undergoing a process of 'institutionalization'. The core principles, beliefs, values and assumptions underlying organizational practices are the construction described by Bourdieu as consisting of academic 'habitus', ideology of the 'field' and social norms. The institutionalization that Rostan and Vaira refer to is seen as "as a process by which such an 'object' [excellence or quality] gains a growing degree of legitimation and taken-for-grantedness *given to it by social actors* [emphasis added] (Berger and Luckmann, 1966)" (ibid., p. viii). Guides on how to develop and run JPs, handbooks of quality practices available through networks and consortiums are good sources to study these emerging institutionalized beliefs and practices.

My premise in this study is that institutions are affected through the agency of organizational actors. In this study institutionalized ways to deal with quality issues are supported through a prioritization and enactment of particular quality practices in HEIs, for instance the use of performance indicators, curriculum assessment, etc. embodying certain institutional logics. In the study *I adopt the approach to practice (a set of practices) as a kind of institution, whereas IW is accomplished through a set of practices*. Since practices are the embodiment of certain values and norms, actors' choices of quality practices will indicate which values and/or norms are guiding actions (e.g., value for money, efficiency, control of process and/or outcomes, compliance, competitiveness, organizational learning and enhancement). The same quality practice might be driven by competing values, and leading to more than one outcome; therefore, access to actors' interpretations of quality practices and institutional pressures will be important.

### 3. *IW entails creation, maintenance and disruption of institutions.*

Empirical studies (e.g., Currie *et al.* 2012; Hargrave and van de Ven, 2009; Hirsch and Bermiss, 2009; Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen and Van de Ven, 2009) have demonstrated that IW involves a complex combination of creating, disrupting and maintaining aspects of work. Hirsch and Bermiss (2009) in the study of the transformation of the Czech Republic from a communist to a capitalist State show how actors engage in work both to transform and maintain institutions through the processes of carrying over existing norms and decoupling. Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2009) study of a utility company in the context of institutional pluralism and the need to respond to opposing market and regulatory logics shows that maintaining institutions involves a combination of strategies to create and disrupt institutions such as establishing space for action and adjusting between competing logics.

In this study HEIs are embedded in a transnational institutional environment which involves competing and contradictory discourses of quality, indicating a certain degree of pluralism in institutional logics. Development and implementation of a JP takes place in HEIs with diverse organizational quality cultures and interpretations of quality. I assert that in order to adopt a joint quality statement and practices, organizational actors build awareness of inherent tensions in quality interpretation, negotiate meaning, and manage legitimacy. Such processes might involve elements of new practice creation, and reproduction and/or disruption of existing ones. I believe that through such structured collaborative engagement as JPs, a space for social learning and reflexivity is created, whereby organizational actors not only share ideas about quality with each other but also enact them through everyday activities. Organizational actors involved in a JP project may be viewed as a community of practices. In Gherardi's (1999) observations, the strength of the community of practice is that "learning is not a separate activity, and that learning-working-innovating take place simultaneously, within practice" (p. 112). On the one hand, for some organizational actors dealing with quality matters in a JP might present itself, in Berger and Luckmann's (1991) terms, problematic (pp. 38-39), e.g., if everyday activities and routines (continuity) are interrupted. Eventually, collaborative work could lead to the enrichment of knowledge and skills needed to run a new project, a change in certain norms, values and thus the creation of new practices. On the other hand, quality developments in a JP project may involve a reproduction of current practices already in place at partner institutions. The reproduction of existing practices could involve either a mere repetition of habitual quality routines or as Hecló (2008) points out, lead to the adoption of an "appreciative viewpoint" (p. 102) that allows one to "acknowledge, and then through choices and conduct,...help realize some

normative order reflected in the task of upholding (an) institution and what it stands for” (ibid).

4. *Agency does not necessarily lead to intended outcomes.*

IW scholars argue that “a focus on institutional work departs from traditional concerns... in its rejection of the notion that the only agency of interest is that associated with “successful” instances of institutional change” (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011, p. 52). Moreover, IW accounts show that even intentional actions may lead to unintended outcomes. Recent IW scholarship provides accounts of “the myriad, day-to-day equivocal instances of agency that, although aimed at affecting the institutional order, represent a complex mélange of forms of agency-successful and not, simultaneously radical and conservative, strategic and emotional, full of compromises, and rife with unintended consequences” (ibid., pp. 52-53).

For instance, Gherardi and Perrotta (2011) explore how a change in medical practices became stabilized by communities of practitioners in an institutional environment of changing laws. Researchers investigate how exogenous change (a change in a law) triggers the emergence of relations that stabilize a new practice. They posit that a stabilization of practice is achieved through the processes of limitation, rhetorical closure, and anchoring in technology. Scholars found that a new practice can bring about both intended and unintended outcomes. Unintended power effects generated by new practice are highlighted.

Based on the discussion of theoretical insights in this section, I present the theoretical framework which is guiding the research (see Figure 1).



In the study of QA processes and their outcomes in Finnish universities, as referred to earlier (section 3.3.3), Haapakorpi (2011) identifies negative QA outcomes. She notes that the increasing number of quality assessments and their routinization lead to an impoverished meaning of quality and motives as well as the loss of relevance. The increasing number of assessments may be associated with institutional pressures emanating from government and other public institutions' calls for transparency and accountability. While the spread of quality practices within the field of HE, on the one hand is indicating the growing legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness of quality practices, empirical studies, on the other hand, highlight varying organizational actors' responses to the processes of quality developments and their outcomes.

Studies on the impact of quality-driven practices are not unproblematic. This is due to the complexity of quality phenomenon in HE, including its multifaceted, value-laden, stakeholder and context relative nature, its process-like approach with no clear end point, and its praxis as an interaction of macro and micro environment in which activities and solutions are constructed. As Stensaker (2007) notes:

Quality work and quality assurance schemes are only some of the many external and internal processes and reform measures which higher education institutions continuously handle and react upon. Isolating the effects of a particular process is, therefore, difficult. A particular problem when analysing effects relates to the many purposes associated with quality assurance. (p. 60)

The analytical framework of IW offers a perspective to view quality-related developments in JPs as an ongoing interaction of structural and agentic elements, and as a situated accomplishment of actors engaged in quality-driven activities. Institutions (here – quality practices) are viewed as located in the sets of practices in which people engage, rather than emerging from those practices and existing at some “other” (macro) level (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Therefore, only by studying how organisations construct solutions to address the issue of quality, what practices they reproduce, what meanings and intentions they attach to quality-related activities, will we be able to connect the effects generated by those activities. As Lawrence *et al.* (2009) theorize, by studying agency, we are naturally interested in the intentionality of human action, “both the degree to which it is connected to the institutions in which it embedded, and the degree to which it is motivated to affect same or other institutions” (p. 14).



## IV. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I outline my ontological and epistemological considerations and include the specifics of the approach, design, and analysis. Key methodological issues such as ethical considerations, research quality criteria applied to the chosen design, and my role as a researcher are discussed.

### 4.1. Ontological and epistemological considerations

The environment in which HE activities take place is not as Gabriel (2008) puts it “an ‘objective reality’ out there, but a social construct” (p. 94). HEIs engaged in JPs are operating in the ‘enacted environment’ instead of a ‘given environment’ ‘out there’ (Weick, 1995). An enacted environment “is based on the continuous trading and juxtaposing of meaning and interpretations about the organization, its purpose, and the situations it faces” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 94). In the case of this study it is the purpose of developing and organizing a JP, its quality and the associated activities. The existing empirical studies on quality in HE have mostly focused either on external quality developments, e.g., policies, national quality frameworks and their influence on the development and adoption of internal organizational quality practices or the effectiveness of these practices. In this study, as a point of departure, I take a view of the dynamic and relational nature of quality phenomenon and its practices embedded in the complex institutional environment of transnational HE. In such an environment, institutional complexity entails a contested notion of quality, multiple organizational quality practices embodying co-existing and potentially conflicting institutional logics, and both structural and organizational differences (e.g., national HE environments, quality culture of HEIs) which affect joint actions and organizing. At the same time, joint interpretations and actions of quality in JPs either sustain a contested notion of quality, promote a particular approach embedded in the existing institutional arrangements, or disrupt those arrangements by creating new practices.

My view on the situated and relational nature of quality and its practices embedded in the complex institutional environment of transnational HE requires a holistic in-depth exploration. In order to understand the complexities of quality phenomenon, it is important to investigate it from the point of view of those who deal with it on a daily basis. As stated by Schwandt (1994), for understanding meaning or *Verstehen*, we need to grasp actors’ definitions of a situation. Such an orientation that seeks to “understand contextualized meaning” (Greene, 2003, p. 597) is rooted in a constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. I share the understanding of the world with a constructionist view of reality which states that “a world

originates in their [people] thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 33). In a social constructionist orientation (cf. *ibid.*; Burrell and Morgan, 2017) people’s reality is inter-subjective, constructed in interaction with others, and is open to multiple interpretations. I also believe that reality is shaping and is being shaped by the environment. While meanings are subjective, reality is taken for granted and not easy to doubt or contemplate (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). As Cunliffe (2003) notes “social constructionists argue that we construct and make sense of social realities in various forms of discourse; conversation, writing, and reading” (p. 988). Based on the literature review, I assert that one way to access a social reality is also through a study of praxis, i.e. realized activities.

## 4.2. Research design

The objectives of this study could best be achieved through a research design which enables in-depth and holistic analysis of phenomenon in its natural environment drawing on data from *multiple levels and sources* (Jepperson and Meyer, 2011). Moreover, the IW framework guiding this study requires a *multi-level analysis*, the examination of both structural and agentic elements, and their interaction. Complementary sources of data and levels of analysis allow me to capture the situated and relational nature of purposive joint action and its impact on [potential] quality enhancement in a JP setting. Organizational scholars acknowledge the benefit of complementary attention to multiple levels of analysis to address how given institutional organization forms and practices emerge and become legitimate (Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009; Marquis and Battilana, 2009; Powell and Colyvas, 2008). Bjerregaard (2011) notes that a methodology which enables a researcher to study a “reciprocal interplay between the general represented in the institutional and the particular represented in the situational” (p. 57) is especially suitable to the analysis of IW. Praxis, i.e. realized activities that are constructed and enacted in macro-meso-micro contexts, are thus studied in the following ways.

A synthesis of available literature and document analysis is undertaken to trace major developments of JPs and their quality at a macro-level. Due to the transnational nature of JPs, the focus is on policy and artefacts produced by policy-makers and HE networks / JP communities at a supranational level, i.e. the EHEA. Field-level quality developments, emerging common and taken-for-granted interpretations of quality and practice of it are primarily studied via publicly available documents. An in-depth qualitative case study approach is utilized to capture and develop an understanding of situated professional activities, and the

webs of meanings underlying those activities in the context of institutional complexity at meso-micro levels.

To study organizational and daily work setting, a single, real-time, qualitative case with embedded units (Stake, 1995) has been chosen due to the following reasons. First, a case study is found particularly suitable for an in-depth, detailed analysis of complex issues at hand in real life settings (Eisenhardt, 1989; Flyvbjerg, 2006; 2011; Yin, 2003), especially in those situations, when boundaries of phenomena are not clear. In this type of research the details of phenomenon under study (here – quality meanings and activities) and the uniqueness and complexity of the context may be studied. In the course of the study, a story of situated knowledge is developed which helps to bring attention to the complexities of the social world. Second, as it was argued earlier, quality in HE is a relative concept (see section 2.1.), thus, in order to broaden and deepen our understanding of the quality phenomenon in HE and the impact of quality-driven processes (either enhancement of teaching and learning and/or other outcomes), quality needs to be interpreted in terms of purpose, context and what routinely happens in HEIs. In other words, it is necessary ‘to zoom in’ and study the specificity of the situation, and the details of human actions and interactions. A case study methodology offers an advantage of “the detail in which a case may be observed and the depth in which it may be analysed. They [cases] can reveal processes that are only apparent if a very close study is carried out” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 32). A case study, therefore, involves creating a rich description and the narrative based on the in-depth analysis and interpretations of various data sources. Third, a research setting of cross-border joint inter-organizational collaborative arrangements found in this study is not a widely examined avenue. It is quite distinct from, for instance, cross-national studies of practices in a multi-national company’s setting with parent and host organizations (e.g., Kostova, 1999; Kostova, Roth and Dacin, 2008) or everyday work in merging firms situation or the inter-organizational collaboration among organizations from different sectors (e.g., Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips, 2002). Nonetheless, it shares the complexity of the institutional environment in which organizing occurs. In the selected case study, for instance, embedded units of HEIs’ departments that are engaged in a partnership are spread across countries. These departments are respectively embedded in different organizational quality cultures and unique national and supra-national HE environment. The boundaries of the latter, especially in the EHEA, may be dissipating. A case study methodology allows carrying out multi-level research, and is, therefore, a good fit for this study. For a visual illustration of the case see Figure 4 in the Appendices.

Integration of a case in the overall study design enabled me to explore the phenomenon of distributed organizing by accessing interpretations of organizational members involved in a JP, while at the same time keeping contexts central to the study. A primary focus of analysis in the case is at a partnership or inter-organizational level focusing on joint actions and their underlying meanings. However, in order to trace the recursive relationship of field-level quality developments, emerging common and taken-for-granted practices and actors' efforts to shape those practices in and through their daily work on quality related issues, I have also drawn upon the analysis of individual research participants' accounts (staff members of HEIs engaged in a JP), their interpretations of quality and specific actions taken to address quality in a joint project, and their engagement in field-level quality developments.

#### *4.2.1. Trustworthiness of research findings*

I hereby proceed to discuss the key issues of research quality typical to this type of design. It will suffice to note here that in this discussion of research quality and its criteria, a parallel with the phenomenon under study (quality in HE) may easily be drawn. After all, research is one of the core HE activities. The criteria of research quality are embedded in competing discourses about the nature of reality, what valid knowledge is and how to discover it. The tensions and contestation regarding quality of research revolve around the issues of objectivity and subjectivity, a researcher's role in the process of investigation, and one's relationship to data and research subjects. More or less institutionalized research practices may be specific to a field of science, a particular discipline and a so called 'epistemic community'.

According to research methodology literature (e.g. Healy and Perry, 2000), criteria for judging quality of research, e.g., generalizability, validity, and reliability depend on the paradigm a researcher is working from, as well as the purpose and type of research project. In conventional research terms, trustworthy research accounts are considered to be those which demonstrate internal validity and reliability. Despite varied opinions in the research methodology literature about the use and applicability of validity and reliability terms in qualitative studies, I find the underlying principle of trustworthiness central in judging quality of research findings. In a more naturalistic type of inquiry, like this study, where the flow of events and relationships unfold in the process of research, validity and reliability criteria are replaced by *credibility and dependability*. A criterion of reliability is meant to provide the readers with evidence that if a study was replicated with the same or similar respondents in the same context, and using the same techniques, its findings and conclusions would be repeated. Such an approach to the research

process and findings is arguable, especially from the epistemological view about the constructed and ongoing nature of reality. I agree with scholars who note that in qualitative studies, especially the findings derived from using non-standardized research methods (semi-structured interviews in this study) “are not necessarily intended to be repeatable since they reflect reality at the time they were collected, in a situation which may be subject to change” (Marshall and Rossman, 1999 in Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). So how can then a reader know that the study findings are trustworthy?

For a case study, Yin (2003) identifies three types of validity: construct, external and internal validity. However, it is the latter type that is the most pertinent to qualitative case studies. Miles and Huberman’s (1994) observation about validity relates to Yin’s definition of internal validity, which can be addressed primarily at the data analysis stage. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest, that in order to achieve internal validity, “meanings have to be tested for their plausibility, their sturdiness, their ‘confirmability’” (p. 11). Likewise, Gabriel (2008) suggests that plausibility, not accuracy in the process of establishing validity is important. For interpretivist research, like this study, *plausibility* concerns the truth value of research findings, whether the account, the inferences made, the experiences described appear to be true and real, whether the reader can relate to the subject’s world (Fulton, 2010). Constructivist research accounts, therefore, consider, among essential quality indicators, ‘truth’ or *credibility*, neutrality or *confirmability*, consistency or *dependability* and applicability or *transferability* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In order to build a credible research account, I am cautious that the constructed realities which exist in the minds of respondents and those that I attribute to research objects and subjects are compatible (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). One of the major threats both to credibility and dependability are my, as principal investigator, bias and errors. In order to minimize these, scholars (e.g. Yin, 2003, p. 37) suggest first, to explicate my own bias, second, to support study findings and interpretations, either converging or competing explanations and conclusions with data, and third, to assure that they are internally coherent. Confirmability, as referred above, is thus a degree to which the findings are the product of the focus of inquiry and not my biases. My self-awareness, explicit assumptions, values and biases are, therefore, important elements in the course of data analysis and interpretation. Researcher’s reflexivity, analytical skills, a detailed account, and transparency of process for arriving at certain interpretations enhance the trustworthiness of research findings. In order to increase the dependability of the study, I apply theoretical insights drawn from extensive literature review (see

section 3.4. and Appendix D) as a guide, somewhat similar to what Yin calls “a standardized agenda for the investigator’s line of inquiry” (2003, p. 68) or a study protocol. Following recommendations in the research methodology literature (e.g. Spiggle, 1994), it is supplemented with an account of field notes, research process log with notes and memos with recorded details of data collection and steps in the analysis. Another important aspect in data collection and analysis process that, I believe, increases both credibility and dependability of research findings is complementarity of methods and data sources. For a more detailed account of what data was collected, what analysis techniques were employed in the study in order to produce a trustworthy account, please see section 4.3.

The last criterion of research quality that I will discuss here is transferability. Many researchers consider generalizability as the most common drawback of case studies, especially when a study is based on a single case. I take a stance of researchers who argue that generalizability might be reached even in a single case at the level of theory “as long as one applies a clear set of analytical principles or theoretical assumptions to different settings, one can generalize about the basic processual factors which are likely to come into play across these settings” (Watson, 2001 in Gabriel, 2008, p.32, also Yin, 2003). Here I also find Eisenhardt’s (1989) point of view that findings can be related to the existing literature applicable (p. 545). In a theory-building rather than a theory-testing study, analytic generalization and “the conditions under which the construct or theory operates” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 29), not a generalization of findings to other settings, is a prime concern.

This case is a qualitative study and, unlike quantitative studies, aims to provide rich context and meaningful (‘thick’) research account for its readers and let them determine how the situation described applies to their situation. In Geertz’s (1973, p. 26) viewpoint, providing a thick description rather than codifying “abstract regularities” and generalizing within a case are the essential tasks of theory-building research. While this study may yield transferable findings that apply to other organizational settings, studying the specificity of quality discourse and practices in higher education means that it may be “difficult to extrapolate results to other contexts beyond the specific academic institution and academic context” (Kyriakidou, 2011, p. 587). Also, various other factors, e.g., the types of HEIs involved, a disciplinary field of a JP, nature of the national quality scheme will influence study findings and, as a result, may not necessarily yield broadly inclusive results. Nonetheless, I agree with scholars who argue that even if the knowledge that is gained from case studies “cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 227). With regards to the issue of

transferability, I take Lincoln and Guba's (1985) view that a decision to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts and other respondents is left with the reader.

#### *4.2.2. Sampling and access*

Purposive sampling (e.g. Silverman, 2005) was used to select both field-level key documents of JP developments and a case in order to ensure that the phenomenon of JP quality and its practices might be observable. Moreover, it was important that the sampling was also theoretical. Glaser and Strauss (1967), who defined such type of sampling, posited that theoretical, not statistical reasons should be driving a selection of a sample. A growing interest in JPs and their quality in HE - indicated by developments in the policy realm and a number of programmes run on the basis of various inter-organizational arrangements, e.g. consortia or university networks facilitated by transnational government initiatives: Erasmus Mundus (EU programme), Nordplus (Nordic-Baltic), Atlantis (EU-US), and the publicly available information on such collaborations - made it easy to identify a thread of key documents as well as a pool of possible cases. As suggested by the literature review, the Bologna Process, its action lines especially related to the topic of quality assurance, was used as the springboard for choosing key documents and developments to be studied in the European HE field. In addition, my professional knowledge and experience and participation in HE conferences enabled me to trace the developments and easily locate policy- and practitioner-oriented documents.

Decisions, however, had to be made about the main criteria by which the case would be selected. An assumption has been made that more variation in the case setting, that is among HEIs engaged in a JP, would maximize the richness of data and dynamics within the study. Although the most challenging and stimulating JP partnerships to study could be the ones engaging HEIs from different continents/countries with the most pronounced differences in HE systems, taking into account certain practicalities such as timeframe, access, cultural and linguistic barriers, the decision was made to select a case from one of the EU-based projects, namely Erasmus Mundus. First, as the preliminary literature as well as personal knowledge gained at international HE professionals' conferences and other meetings on cross-border academic collaborations indicated, Erasmus Mundus projects pay explicit attention to quality. HEIs engaged in an Erasmus Mundus project have to jointly address quality related matters. Second, by selecting one of these projects, despite very broad generalizations, certain variation could be assured via the following: JPs that would engage HEIs from different geographical areas (e.g., British Isles, Scandinavia, Continental Europe, Mediterranean),

historically varied higher education models (e.g., Anglo-Saxon, Humboldtian, Napoleonic), and types of institution (public/private, research intensive/more professionally oriented, state-funded/not, etc.). Third, quality-related regulatory developments in EHEA (especially those addressing international degree programmes) both governments' and HEIs' interest in the development and dissemination of best practices in JP management, including the aspect of quality, indicated emerging field-level institutional practices. Lastly, I have searched for projects at HEIs which are actively engaged in JP networks such as JOIMAN and other similar networks. Collecting data about JPs, their design, implementation, dissemination and promotion of certain administrative and managerial practices are among key activities of JP networks.

Furthermore, although Erasmus Mundus includes JPs at Master (second cycle) and Doctoral (third cycle) level, the decision was made to select a taught Master's programme over a research-based degree because of a clearer internal structure incorporating elements taught in the programme. Also, a case study of the taught Master's programme allows broader transferability of findings to all kinds of cross-border academic collaborative programme settings, e.g., first-cycle degree programmes, non-degree, professional, etc. In the first round of selection, the decision was made to exclude all new projects in relation to the objective of the study to focus on praxis, actions taken to deal with quality issues. Due to disciplinary differences, my own background, and a better fit between research approach and the disciplinary area of JP under study, JPs in natural and technological sciences have also been excluded from the sample. As Becher's (1994) research on disciplinary cultures indicates, one might find less contestation and tensions over quality matters in the design of natural and technological science curriculum than in humanities and social science programmes.

Prior to negotiating access, a few possible cases based on the above listed criteria were short-listed. This was done after reviewing all Erasmus Mundus courses in Europe online (a total of 138), attending conference sessions where international higher education professionals discussed problems and challenges of JPs as well as shared "best practices" (EAIE annual conference, September, 2012), and having initial conversations with staff from universities/departments engaged in JPs.

The chosen case is a second-cycle (Master's level) Erasmus Mundus JP (also called EM course). It is currently provided by a global network of HEIs. The researcher approached consortium institutions in the spring of 2015 in order to negotiate access to institutions involved in JP. Arrangements were made regarding access to data, its usage, the confidentiality, and anonymity of institutional as well as



personal information. A confidentiality statement was signed with the consortium coordinating institution to safeguard a proper use of data and the privacy of participants. Since this is an in-depth case study, it was agreed with the consortium coordinator that all measures will be taken so that the programme is not identifiable. While such an agreement has certain limitations for a more elaborate and detailed description of the sites visited, the profile of the institutions, and the field of JP studies, it did not prevent me to explore the research questions in depth.

### **4.3. Data types, collection and analysis**

In order to develop a multi-level understanding of JPs and their quality developments, complex and recursive relationships involved between actions and institutions, I adopted an iterative approach to data collection and analysis. It is at the core of a more pragmatic and naturalistic type of inquiry in which my role as a researcher is to be attuned to how social interactions and actions examined unfold. The iterative approach to data collection and analysis requires a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning and data analysis processes. This study is not purely inductive. It is guided by the IW framework and a specific notion of quality oriented towards action. The data collection and analysis are driven by the overarching research questions and a developed line of inquiry, a sort of 'study protocol' (please see Appendix E).

The following dimensions of iteration aided in the process of inquiry: a) moving between data and theory; b) moving back and forth between data collection and analysis, and c) moving between parts of data and the whole for data analysis. In the course of such a process, preceding operations shape subsequent ones (Spiggle, 1994). It is at the core of a naturalistic approach to data collection and analysis when, subsequent data collection and analysis steps, e.g. questions asked and/or focus of investigation may be adjusted based on preliminary analysis. Such an approach enables the researcher to make necessary adjustments during the course of inquiry, and progressively focus the analysis based on preliminary fieldwork. The iterative approach thus requires the researcher to collect and analyse data concurrently, and to make decisions throughout the course of the study about any additional data that is needed in order to reach the research aims. Data types collected during the study are outlined in the following section. More details on data analysis are available in section 4.3.2.

### *4.3.1. Data types*

Based on the extensive literature review, guided by the IW framework and the chosen methodology, the following data types and collection methods were utilized. These include primary and secondary data. The primary data includes documentary evidence, observational field notes as well as information gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews (e.g. Miller and Crabtree, 2004). Secondary data included Bologna Process and Erasmus Mundus reports, JP development-related conference proceedings, publications, and similar. Please see Appendix D for a more detailed list.

Publicly available data from the institutional environment tracing the development of main quality driven processes, widely disseminated in EHEA quality guiding documents were collected. These include field-level regulatory and normative documents related to international JPs (including Erasmus Mundus) quality and its practices such as supra-national policies and guidelines, quality handbooks and various templates developed by professional networks engaged in JPs (e.g., JOIMAN and JOI.CON). Both regulatory and normative documents were reviewed, analysed and compared in order to gain insights into the emerging JP quality discourse and practice.

Desk research on the selected JP was conducted in order to gather data about the profile of HEIs (PIs) and their respective departments engaged in the project, partnership history related to the project, motives for collaboration, and information about specific JP activities related to internal quality developments as outlined in JP agreement, joint quality statement and/or strategy. Organizational data included:

- publicly available information provided on the consortium web page and each partner institution's web pages;
- documents provided by the consortium such as consortium partnership and cooperation agreement (16 pages), excerpts from Erasmus Mundus application and reports to the EU EM agency administering the programme, documents on quality assurance strategy and quality mechanisms, external programme evaluation results (15 pages); both archival data and current information including meeting minutes (appr. 300 pages);
- researcher's e-mail correspondence with consortium Steering Committee members.

The fieldwork started in summer of 2015 with the visit to a Summer School, one of the core activities of the programme which takes place annually for all first-year students and usually is held in partner university countries on a rotating order. Students, academic and administrative staff from all PIs participate in the summer school. Teaching and learning activities take place, information sharing among PIs, feedback sessions are organized for students as well as Consortium meetings for staff members. The purpose of this visit was to get in contact with members of all founding and full partner universities, discuss the possibility of visiting each institution, through observations and informal conversations get an overall understanding of how the partnership is organized. Prior to the fieldwork, a lot of documents about the case, both publicly available and kept at the coordinating institution, have been received and reviewed. The fieldwork continued in October with a visit to a coordinating institution, followed by visits to all full partner universities in November 2015 – January 2017. During institutional visits twenty-one interview with JP staff was conducted, and additional documents collected.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted at the departments engaged in JP. An interview guide was developed including predetermined open-ended questions about quality and its practices to generate conversation in the case setting. These interview questions were based on a set of questions guiding the whole process of data collection and analysis (see Appendix E). Additional questions in the course of the interview were asked when participants referred to specific day-to-day activities which were central to quality developments in their JP. The decision to conduct one-to-one interviews rather than focus groups or observation was made based on the following reasoning. First, the informants are located at universities in different countries, thus it was not be feasible to gather a dispersed group of professionals in one place. Second, one of the analytical levels in the study is the individual (for more on analytical levels see the following section), therefore it was important to engage participants in the articulation and interpretation of quality and its practices in order to uncover their implicit meanings and underlying logic. In qualitative studies, an interview is a good way to access “actively constructed ‘narratives’” of the participants, and get the interpretations of their constructed reflective realities (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Third, the study focuses on relational aspects of meaning making and the ways that those meanings are reflected through shared understanding in organizational activities and practices. As suggested by scholars, “interviews become... valid ways of capturing shared cultural understandings and enactments of the social world” (Atkinson and Coffey, 2002, cited by Silverman, 2006, p. 148).

A total of twenty-one semi-structured interviews with consortium head and coordinators, staff teaching in the JP, and academic and administrative coordinators made a total of 22 hours (1320 minutes) of interviewing. The verbatim transcribed interview data takes 252 pages. All written case documentation and audio files were entered into and processed by using the qualitative data software tool NVivo (for a rationale of using the software, please see the following section). More details about the sources and type of data that were collected during the study are provided in Appendix D.

#### *4.3.2. Data analysis and interpretation*

Qualitative data analysis and interpretation are fundamental activities in the process of making certain inferences (e.g. Spiggle, 1994). In this section I describe how I carried out these activities. The study is concerned with a construction and enactment of quality practices at multiple interrelated analytical levels: (a) the institutional: examining the regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive frameworks guiding quality and its practices in collaborative degree programmes; (b) the inter-organizational: analysing JP arrangements, its quality strategy and mechanisms; (c) the individual: examining HE professionals' engaged in a joint project views on quality and their involvement in quality-related activities (section 6.3). In order to develop an empirical account of the situated and relational nature of quality practices, JP and its quality-related developments at each level and interactions among those developments needed to be analysed and explicated.

I began empirical data analysis by carefully reading documents, interview transcriptions and observational notes followed by categorization or the coding process (identification of key themes and patterns) which included a combination of theory-driven codes as well as those directly emerging from data. The latter, as suggested by researchers (Wals, 1992; Cantrel, 1993 cited by Gough and Scott, 2000, p. 341), “‘emerge’ during the ...research” from the data collected. “The development of provisional categories, constructs, and conceptual connections for subsequent exploration” (Spiggle, 1994, p. 495) aids the process of induction – a development of concepts and constructs from the data. In order to avoid what Gibbs (2007) calls ‘a definitional drift in coding’ or inconsistency, when combining inductively and deductively derived codes, a constant comparison technique was employed. Similarities and differences of data chunks were assessed, and certain labels (codes) were assigned to data. Writing memos about codes helped to ensure consistency. Theory-driven coding, derived from the IW framework (Figure 1) included quality-related activities (what is being done and said), actors who are engaged in those activities, intentions and anticipated

outcomes of quality related strategy and actions, actors' motivation (why a particular practice), and reflexivity (relevance of practice to the project at hand; any secondary outcomes). A sample list of provisional theory-driven codes guiding data analysis is included in the Appendix F.

The initial coding included six major themes set in the NVivo project: Discourses; EM JP policy; JP (actors, enablers, constraints); Practices, mechanisms, praxis; Quality (definitions/ dimensions, intentions, indicators); Quality and IW. These six categories had 68 sub-themes/sub-categories/codes, in NVivo called Nodes. Coded data from the fieldwork was re-grouped to identify second-order themes that could be used for the data display, findings, and initial conclusions. Second-order themes were comprised of groups of first-order themes. These were cross checked and examined through references to the field notes, as well as going back directly to the raw data.

After the coding/categorizing of data was complete, I proceeded with abstraction. This stage built on categorization when empirically grounded categories, derived through the process of comparison and contrast, were collapsed in higher-order conceptual constructs (Spiggle, 1994). In order to create more abstract constructs of informants' experiences, I searched for the resemblance of meanings or emic redundancies among idiographic accounts of informants. As suggested by Gibbs (2007), a comparison technique was used throughout the whole analysis process (not just a coding stage) so that data would be treated consistently and comprehensively. A comparison procedure also aided in the identification of any negative or contradictory cases, which were then further investigated. The analytical procedure of comparison also helped to discern the theoretical significance of a construct, that is "its relationship to other constructs or its connection to a broader gestalt of individual's experiences" (Spiggle, 1994, p. 493). One of the iterative analysis process dimensions, mentioned earlier, moving back and forth between parts of data and the whole (whether, e.g., within one interview transcript or one interview and the entire set of interviews, one document part and a set of documents), also called as hermeneutical procedure, allowed a more unified interpretation of data. Iteration aided not only the process of induction, but also the one of deduction, when concepts were refined in order to draw their theoretical implications (Spiggle, 1994).

Similarly to interview data, document analysis moved from the coding to categorical aggregation and abstraction stages. Triangulating data from various sources such as data gathered through interviews (what was said) and internal JP documents (what was written) was important for deriving trustworthy research

findings. Hara (2009) notes that common language and vocabulary emerging from data not only “indicates a shared comprehension of explicit knowledge, (e.g. meanings of words), but also signifies the existence of tacit knowledge (e.g. metaphors and values)” (p.14) or as suggested by Garfinkel (1967 in Cunliffe, 2003, p. 996) taken-for-granted aspects. However, as observed by Clifford (1986), a researcher may not be privy to the understanding of the implicit participant’s meanings “because s/he works from within another web of meaning” (ibid.). A useful strategy suggested by Cunliffe (2003) that may help to surface implicit understandings of participants, and at the same time to minimize my bias in the interpretation of data, thereby more accurately to represent it, was asking participants to reflexively account for their practices (pp. 996-997). Since the analysis of reflexivity is key to the notion of agency in institutional work and my focus on praxis, questions on practice reflexivity have been included into the provisional interview guide.

As said, for data handling NVivo software was used. This software is specifically designed to work with qualitative data. It aids researchers in the process of data analysis. The software allows storing, organizing, and easily retrieving various data sources, coding data, keeping memos and notes as well visualizing the relationships when needed.

#### **4.4. A researcher’s role and ethical considerations**

The conceptual, theoretical, methodological choices made at the beginning of the study indicate how I, as a person and a researcher view social reality, a phenomenon under study, and knowledge production. In this section, I reflect upon my role as a researcher in conducting this qualitative study, a relationship with participants in the study and ethical implications. Interpretivist scholars insist that researchers are not “detached” (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Cunliffe (2003) suggests that a radically-reflexive approach to research treats the researcher as a social participant and a social participant as researcher. Such a relationship between a researcher and a participant is natural to the interpretive inquiry like this study. In such studies “a researcher and a participant are engaged (and collaborating) in ‘making meaning’ and ‘producing knowledge’” (Silverman, 2006, p. 147). My bias, experience, expertise, and insight towards the phenomenon under study as well as my actions, taken-for-granted suppositions, linguistic practices, analytical skills, interpretation of texts and subject’s meanings are all part of co-creation of meanings. In a qualitative study, like this one, knowledge is produced through my direct engagement and interaction with participants during face-to-face interviews, their encounter with me throughout the study, sharing of experiences,

and reflecting upon them, providing me with certain data and perhaps leaving some out. The researcher's role and relationship with the subject in the study raises certain ethical implications that I needed to be aware of. Below I identify some of ethical implications and study limitations as well as discuss the ways to minimize their effects.

One of the limitations in the study is that it is conducted by a single investigator. Thus it was highly important to consider and question my values, bias and assumed beliefs, explicate them to the reader and to reflect upon those throughout the course of the study. As suggested by Cunliffe (2003), the reader needs to be aware of my assumptions' impact on the study and its findings. For instance, one of my assumed beliefs about the phenomenon of quality and its activities in HE is that such activities are improvement-led. Thus a question raised in the study is on how quality practices in JP affect quality enhancement. Also, in the study I treated agency as praxis, a particular form of social engagement with inherent transformative capacity. However, as the literature review points out, intentional actions vary, thereby I had to be alert to research subjects' intentions in relation to JPs and their quality-driven activities.

Since data collection in this case was also dependent on respondents' willingness to share information and their experience, it was of vital importance to establish with them a relationship of trust and openness, as well as treat participants of the study ethically throughout all stages of the project. Before active data collection each participant received a 'Participant information sheet' and a copy of an informed consent form which was signed prior to participation in the study. These documents served two primary purposes. First, to ensure that participants are provided with sufficient information about the research, its purpose and scope, the person collecting the data, and also their role in the study and time commitment required. Second, I wanted to assure participants of confidentiality, the anonymity of their personal data as well as their organization's details. Such information was properly coded when processing and storing data, and even more importantly, needed to adequately be protected during the stage of reporting and disseminating research outcomes. It is both a legislative and ethical issue to protect this kind of data.

In line with the constructivist orientation to inquiry, this study aims to expose the complexity of the environment under study and the multiplicity of viewpoints of the subjects. In order to achieve this, Bryman and Bell (2011) suggest that "the author must de-centre [oneself] as a privileged voice..., instead allowing multiple voices to appear and disrupt each other" (p.701). In the phases of document

analysis and active data gathering, such as interviewing, it was important not to make value judgments and/or impose my viewpoint of quality phenomenon. Even though interview questions and probing inescapably lead participants to focus on and discuss certain issues, I have chosen semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to let participants tell their story and what they feel is most important in relation to quality-driven activities. In the analysis and interpretation stages, I was careful to express myself clearly and write the story, to consider which data gets included and excluded, choosing whose voices I select to represent and whose voices to leave out.

A comprehensive and consistent data analysis in qualitative studies sometimes is considered by researchers as ethical. Rigor of analysis and transparency, e.g. of the procedures employed, a detailed account of the process leading to research findings, helped to establish the trustworthiness of findings. In this kind of study, when the research project is carried out by a single investigator, it was important to engage supervisors in the various stages of data analysis and interpretation in order to question the procedures used as well as challenge interpretations and inferences.

To briefly summarize this chapter, a multi-level study was designed consisting of document analysis at macro-level and a single, real time, in-depth qualitative case with embedded units at meso-micro levels. Research in this dissertation is carried out from a constructionist ontology basis and interpretivist epistemology. The phenomenon of JPs and their quality practice is studied as inter-subjective reality, constructed via actions and interactions that are open to multiple interpretations. The qualitative approach to data analysis included both inductively and deductively driven coding and categorization, merging and constructing them into higher-order, more abstract thematic threads. Principles of trustworthiness and ethics guided the research process in order to build a credible, confirmable, dependable, as well as a transferable research account.



## V. MACRO-LEVEL DEVELOPMENTS OF JOINT STUDY PROGRAMMES AND THEIR QUALITY

Drawing on document analysis and a synthesis of available literature, I outline the developments of JPs in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). First, I identify players and review processes in the EHEA and respective national settings, the developments taking place at a macro-level that were instrumental in promoting and supporting JPs, creating their vision and profile as well as attributing certain roles and purposes to this type of collaborative HE activity. I analyse how policy work, the construction of professional networks, associations and their activities contributed to the current configuration and characteristics of JPs, the emergence of their quality discourse and practice. By tracing macro-level developments of JPs in the realm of the European political agenda, activities of various HE networks and associations which represent HE stakeholder interests and best organizational practices, I explicate the interactions taking place and demonstrate a recursive and purposive nature of the work involved.

### 5.1. Policy work: policies and actions

Joint study programmes, leading to the award of double, multiple, or joint degrees, as a form of inter-institutional collaboration among European universities emerged already in the late eighties, early nineties. Although not a new phenomenon, early in 2000 and onwards, JPs have received a renewed interest at the European level. Mobilization of political, regulatory, and financial support for JPs in the policy realm took place *vis-a-vis promoting JPs, establishing a model Erasmus Mundus (EM) programme, adopting QA approach to JPs, urging EHEA countries to remove national obstacles and to increase the offer of integrated curricula*. These were followed by certain adjustments in national legal systems regulating the provision and accreditation of JPs, trying to solve recognition and quality matters. The developments were embedded in the reforms of HE through the Bologna Process, the European political agenda in the areas of education, economics, employability, international development and they were carried out primarily by policy forming institutions. JPs in the EHEA became one of the instruments to achieve the objectives of the Bologna declaration and Bologna Process, the Lisbon strategy goals, as well as to address labour market demands and employability issues.

European level institutions such as the European Commission (EC), the European Council (EUCO), the European Parliament (EP), the Council of the European Union (EU Council), national level actors such as European Ministers of Education, and

the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) got engaged. Policy work carried out by European institutions and national ministries from the institutional work perspective explicates regulatory incentives and pressures that promoted the development and implementation of JPs, constructed their role in the EHEA, particular elements and characteristics of such collaborative programmes and the approach to dealing with their quality matters (for quality matters turn to section 5.3). The Table V-1 shows the macro-level actors, their roles and actions taken in JP developments.

**Table V-1. Macro-level actors, their roles and actions**

<b>Level/Actor</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Instrument</b>
<b>EU</b>		
European Parliament Council of the European Union	Setting aims and objectives, standards, rules, and procedures	Policy, establishment of the EM programme: funded activities (joint programme, mobility of students and scholars, curriculum development and cooperation of consortiums)
EM unit of DG EAC of the European Commission DG DEVCO	Strategic management of the EM, ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the EM, transparency of implementation	Evaluation of the programme, recommendations for further implementation Development of guidelines, indicators, best practices re management, administration of EM projects
EACEA	Management and administration Selection of projects Collection of data Monitoring (e.g., checking on alumni, institutional practices to assure employability of graduates) Regulating / Prescribing	Application calls Reports from beneficiaries Ad-hoc surveys among EM students and alumni Required internal and external evaluation of EM programmes Publicity means, e.g., programme website

<b>Level/Actor</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Instrument</b>
<b>Member States</b>		
National and/or federal	HE/study programme legal base Requirements and regulations Reforming HE to align to EU 'requirements' (degree structure, credit system, QA) through programme and / or institutional accreditation Promoting university autonomy	Legal provisions for joint degrees Tuition fee structures Study programme (including joint) regulations (curriculum, final project ECTS) Three cycle study programme structure Student feedback requirements, alumni monitoring Accountability for nationally funded programmes Accreditation structures
National Structures	Promoting awareness about JPs and EM programme among HEIs Add hoc support to institutions involved in EM	

Programmes of collaborative and cross-institutional nature have been driven by Bologna-related developments (Papatsiba, 2014). The Bologna Process started in 1999 when 29 European Ministers of Education signed the Bologna Declaration, the purpose of which was to introduce a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by the year 2010. The Bologna Process is an intergovernmental, voluntary process based on consensus and the commitment of countries involved to reform national HE systems according to the objectives set in the Process. In the course of the Bologna developments, many countries have joined the process. In 2016, 47 EU and non-EU countries were participating. In addition to the EC, consultative members of the Council of Europe, UNESCO, representatives of higher education institutions (EUA and EURASHE), students (ESU), employers (BUSINESSEUROPE) and quality assurance agencies (ENQA) became part of the ongoing reforms in higher education. A representative from each participating country and a consultative body comprised a Bologna Follow-Up Group (hereafter, BFUG) were tasked with moving reforms forward. After the Bologna Declaration, follow-up was discussed at the Ministerial Conferences which took place every two or three years with new agreements or so called action lines promoted in the respective Communiqués regarding the achievement of a common EHEA. While “the reform agenda is implemented in a decentralized way at a national level, ... it is closely monitored and advanced by European level reports, conferences,

...policy declarations which are all structured around a series [of these] biennial ministerial meetings” (Keeling, 2006, p. 207).

Research indicates that JPs as one of the instruments in the EHEA are employed to contribute to the achievement of the following Bologna objectives:

- to promote student mobility (Action Line 4),
- European cooperation on quality assurance (Action Line 5),
- to establish a ‘European dimension’ in higher education (Action Line 6)
- to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of higher education in future (Action Line 9)<sup>1</sup> (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

The mobility promoted in Bologna Declaration took into consideration fundamental individual rights for free movement, student access to various training opportunities, and recognition for periods abroad spent by students and staff. There were a number of parallel and complementary EU-wide initiatives in HE which promoted the internationalization and cooperation agenda through academic mobility, curricula development projects, etc. Among the most notable ones in this respect were the predecessors of current Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020): Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013) and Socrates (1987-2007). JPs as a more structured and integrated form of cooperation would have an in-built study abroad element enhanced with language and other support for all students enrolled in the programme (Nickel, Zdebel and Westerheijden, 2009). The development of intercultural skills and multi-lingual abilities for students in JPs is linked with labour market demands and enhanced prospects for employability. JPs are promoted as an opportunity to acquire an internationally recognized degree and improve career chances in the international labour market by gaining diverse experiences through varied academic approaches in the study field and learning about different cultures.

In the course of the Bologna Process, the quality of European HE has been identified by European Ministers of Education as one of the key aims of the reforms in the HE sector. The improved quality of HE was linked to the creation of a more attractive, competitive sector and the facilitation of mobility (ENQA, 2011), visible in Bologna actions 4 and 9. High-quality European HE was to play an important role in Europe’s aspiration to be the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world (European Council, 2000). In a

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<sup>1</sup> Action lines 4-6 were part of the initial Bologna Declaration in 1999, whereas action line 9 was formulated at the Prague ministerial meetings in 2001.

knowledge-based economy, the role of education and research gains a more central role. While aspirational in nature, these EHEA goals were supplemented by the real need for upgraded competences of the workforce. The programmes of collaborative nature, according to Papatsiba (2014), were to stimulate the “processes of integration and convergence within HE in Europe.. [as well] as champion a competitive vision of a ‘world-class’ ‘European’ HE brand” (p. 44). The convergence aim was to be achieved “in a special way: as a bottom-up tool developed and implemented by the HEIs themselves” (Tauch and Rauhvagers, 2002, p. 28) which would strengthen intercultural understanding, “contribute to more transparency and... bring European study programme systems in line (convergence) with each other through mutual recognition of academic degrees” (JOINTDEGREE, n.d.). One of the QA aspects promoted in the Bologna Declaration aimed namely for comparability of degrees. As the Bologna Process progressed, this meant both the development of national procedures for evaluation and validation of degree programmes (including JPs) as well as enhanced transparency among HEIs, and mutual recognition of academic degrees.

With regard to Bologna action line 6, the European dimension in higher education at the outset of the Bologna reforms was linked with “curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research” (Bologna Declaration, 1999). At the 2001 Prague Ministerial meeting, ‘European’ referred to the content, orientation, and organisation of educational offer (Prague Communiqué). As Bologna-related reforms have progressed, its aims expanded, new forms and instruments were sought to achieve the (re)formulated objectives. It has been debated by education policy analysts (e.g. Bojan, 2007) what the underlying meanings of *European dimension* were, with different interpretations of it when it comes to the cooperation activities within the EHEA and in relation to other regions of the world as well as the need to differentiate between individual and institutional (HEI) levels when it comes to the implementation of this aim. According to Bojan (ibid.), mobility of individuals and the development of their linguistic capabilities through cultural exchanges have been given a ‘substance’ for the realization of European dimension at the individual level.

HEIs’ cooperation with neighbouring countries and other regions of the world, fostering and strengthening the intercultural understanding not only within the EHEA, but also beyond it received attention not only in the HE modernisation agenda. The role of HE, and consequently JPs thus were also linked to broader EU policy goals such as “promoting the European identity and economic competitiveness” (Papatsiba, 2014, p. 44), development of knowledge-based

economy, and cooperation between EU and other regions of the world. While historically the HE sector in the EU has not been an area of direct policy regulation, in Keeling's (2006) words, "the field of education is notable by its absence in the EU's founding Treaties" (p. 204), both the Lisbon strategy and the Bologna Process "have provided new opportunities for the Commission to assert – and insert – itself in the higher education policy arena" (ibid., p. 205). In EU institutions there was an increasing acknowledgement that the education and research sector will need to play a key role in a knowledge-based economy and the development of societies. Therefore, education matters were linked with policies in economics, employability and international development. JPs have been promoted by the EU as one of the instruments of its international development policies: "external activities to promote international cooperation in education and training are seen as an essential part of... [EU] international policies and are judged increasingly important by policy makers" (Corbett, 2011, p. 39).

Such multiplicity of purposes assigned to this particular form of cooperation in HE contributed to the institutional complexity surrounding JPs. Varied national HE characteristics and settings including legal systems, degree requirements, quality understandings and ways to approach it were pieces of the same puzzle called institutional complexity. Through Ministerial meetings, EHEA countries have been called not only to increase HE offerings in partnership (Prague Communiqué, 2001), i.e. promote the development and implementation of JP curricula, but also to look for remedies at easing the above mentioned complexities. Bologna countries were asked to remove legal obstacles for such type of international and inter-institutional cooperation as JPs, work on the recognition of degrees offered in partnership as well as the development of quality assurance schemes (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). JPs "have been on the agenda of all the Bologna conferences since Prague 2001" (Nickel, Zdebel and Westerheijden, 2009, p. 25). The table V-2 illustrates the major Bologna Process steps as well as parallel EU level strategies and decisions which steered JP developments in the EHEA during the period of 1999-2015.

**Table V-2. Timeline for major joint programme developments in the Bologna Process and EU policy agenda (1999-2015):**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Actor</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Promoted</b>
1999	European Ministers of Education	Bologna Process	Student mobility, cooperation on quality assurance, European dimension, attractiveness and competitiveness of EHE
2000	European Council	Lisbon Strategy	Competitive knowledge-based economy in the world
2001	European Ministers of Education	Bologna Process: Prague Communique	Increase of integrated curricula development and offer in partnership by institutions from different countries
	European Commission	The concrete future objectives of education systems	Improving the quality of education Skills for knowledge society Establishing partnerships, strengthening cooperation, and increasing mobility
2003	European Ministers of Education	Bologna Process: Berlin Communique	Agreement on removing legal obstacles for joint study programmes, implementing adequate QA schemes for integrated curricula
	European Parliament Council of the European Union	Decision No 2317/2003/EC to establish Erasmus Mundus programme	Enhancement of quality in HE , promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries
2004	UNESCO Council of Europe	Recommendations on the recognition of joint degrees	Recognition of joint degrees
2005	European Ministers of Education	Bologna Process: Bergen Communique	Recognition of joint degrees
2007	European Ministers of Education	Bologna Process: London Communique	Increase of joint degrees and flexible curricula
2008	European Parliament Council of the European Union	Decision No 2317 /2003/ EC extension of Erasmus Mundus programme	Improve the development of human resources Promote EHE
2012	European Ministers of Education	Bologna Process: Bucharest Communique	No obstacles for cooperation and mobility in national contexts, recognition of QA agencies across the EHEA
2015	European Ministers of Education	Bologna Process: Yerevan Communique	European approach for QA of joint programmes

With regards to legal issues:

an international milestone was reached in the form of the UNESCO/Council of Europe Recommendations on the Recognition of Joint Degrees, which were appended to the Lisbon Recognition Convention<sup>2</sup> on 9 June 2004. They provide international definitions as a basis for the amendment of national legislation, which did not take joint degrees sufficiently into account in the initial phase of the Bologna Process. They recommend that the national education policy-makers eliminate legal obstacles to the development of joint degrees and provide as much scope as possible for programme structures and types of degree. (Nickel, Zdebel and Westerheijden, 2009, pp. 32-33)

Further steps for strengthening the visibility and common recognition of JPs were taken in follow-up ministerial meetings. For instance, in 2005, Ministers called upon national authorities and other stakeholders to recognise joint degrees awarded in two or more countries in the EHEA (Bergen Communiqué). In the 2007 London meeting, the agreement was reached to increase the number of joint degrees and the creation of flexible curricula (London Communiqué). During the next decade (2010-2020) Ministerial meetings focused on the consolidation of the EHEA, its common aspirations and goals. In 2012 Bucharest, Ministers agreed that national rules and practices relating to JPs and degrees will further be examined so that “obstacles to cooperation and mobility embedded in national contexts” (Bucharest Communiqué) would be dismantled. In addition, the Communiqué included “the aim for EQAR agencies’ quality assurance decisions to be recognized across EHEA” (ibid.). The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) as an ‘umbrella’ organisation of national quality assurance agencies was established in 2007. It was the first legal entity in the EHEA to deal with quality matters.

Among the most recent policy measures is the document adopted in the 2015 Ministerial meeting of Yerevan on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (hereafter, EAQAJP). The adopted approach is yet another attempt to remove the remaining obstacles in the EHEA related to the development of JPs, and, more importantly outline the certain standards for JPs. These prescribe which HEIs would be eligible to offer JPs, the need for their cooperation agreement to deliver a JP, the joint nature of programme design and delivery. The standards also include a section on such aspects of programmes as learning outcomes, curriculum as *fit-for-purpose*, credits and workload, learning, teaching and assessment; processes and procedures for admission, recognition of qualification

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<sup>2</sup> This international convention regulates the recognition of national degree qualifications in a European framework (UNESCO/Council of Europe 2004).



awarded; student support; resources (human resources and other), transparency of JP activities and QA. The approach acknowledges the role of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in maintaining quality of JPs (please see section 5.3.4). The EAQAJP will serve as a reference point for the external validation of JPs via accreditation processes.

#### *5.1.1. Erasmus Mundus programme: a model of joint programme excellence*

Another notable development and policy action in the EHEA related to the emergence and spread of JP practice was the decision made in 2003 by the European Parliament and the Council of European Union to establish the Erasmus Mundus programme (hereafter, EM). The EM has been chosen as one of the policy instruments supporting higher education internationalization and the modernization agenda in order to address global competition in HE. The decision was guided by strategic European Community aspirations to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world and driven by forces affecting higher education globally: rising competition in the global knowledge economy, especially the regions of North America and Asia, the increased demand for a highly skilled, adaptable workforce as well as the need for talents. The EM programme was also part of an external EU policy agenda aimed at the development of societies through the enhancement of intercultural understanding and cooperative activities in education, training and research between EU and other regions of the world.

Selected EM JPs at a Master's level and related activities, so called actions such as mobility of students and scholars, curriculum development and cooperation of consortia were promoted and financed. After the programme's extension in 2008, EM activities could also take place at the third cycle of education, i.e. Doctoral level. In 2014 EM became part of a larger EU programme in education, Erasmus+. With time the EM became a 'flagship' programme delineating parameters for JPs, markers of excellence, and a model programme for JPs in general. As such it became one of the building blocks in the institutional work of JP practice. In order to aid our understanding of current JP practises and their developments, I analyse how EM goals and elements were constructed in the policy documents.

The EC was responsible for setting the EM programme aims, objectives, targets, and selection criteria. The overarching aim of the EM is the ambition to contribute to the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries. It was

envisioned that the programme would contribute to Europe’s aspirations to modernize the HE system by strengthening it through increased quality and innovation, and consequently enhance EHEA’s attractiveness in the face of growing internationalization and competition of HE around the globe. While the launch of the EM programme heavily focused on excellence for the inward-oriented purpose, the extension of the programme in 2008 emphasized more the outward orientation through the contribution to the sustainable development of the third countries. The promotion of European higher education, its quality, attractiveness and competitiveness worldwide were much more explicit than in 2003. References were made to Barcelona EU Council meeting in 2002 when the objective of making the European Union’s education and training systems “a world quality reference by 2010” was set (Council of the European Union, 2002a). The extension of the programme in 2008 also paid more attention to aspects of equal opportunities and non-discrimination when selecting programme beneficiaries. Table V-3 illustrates the EM programme linkages with European developments.

**Table V-3. Erasmus Mundus programme in the context of European developments**

<b>Erasmus Mundus objectives<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>European developments</b>
to contribute to the development of quality education through cooperation with third countries	Bologna (1999)
to contribute to the sustainable development of third countries in the field of higher education	External policies
‘opening-up’ to the wider world to help improve and enhance the career prospects of students to promote intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries	The concrete future objectives of education systems (European Commission, 2001) Education and Training 2010 (Council of the European Union, 2002b) (London Communiqué, 2007)
to meet the challenge of globalisation and the demands of the knowledge society	Lisbon strategy (Council of the European Union, 2000)
to ensure that the European higher education system acquires a worldwide degree of attractiveness	Bologna (1999)

<sup>3</sup> EM objectives set in the EU legislation (L340, L345)

The programme had the following overall aims which were set initially when the programme was introduced in 2003 with some additions at the time of extension of the programme in 2008:

- to enhance the quality of European higher education (EP and EU Council, 2003);
- to improve the development of human resources and enhance the career prospects of students (EP and EU Council, 2003; 2008);
- to promote intercultural understanding through co-operation with third countries (EP and EU Council, 2003; 2008);
- to contribute to the sustainable development of third countries in the field of education (EP and EU Council, 2008);
- to promote European higher education (EP and EU Council, 2008).

In addition, a set of four operational objectives listed below has been outlined. These objectives together with support activities promoted cooperation, exchange of experience and good practice, the importance of language skills together with intercultural understanding, and innovation:

- to promote a quality offer in higher education with a distinct European value through cooperative activities in teaching and research, and, in particular by developing and running JPs collaboratively by a few European institutions;
- to encourage incoming mobility of third-country graduate students and scholars to participate in these cooperative activities;
- to foster structured co-operation with third-country higher education institutions as partner institutions in JPs and members of Consortiums created for the purposes of running JPs;
- to improve accessibility and enhance the profile and visibility of higher education in EU (2003) and in the world (2008) by providing scholarships for students to participate in JPs, a 'distinct' product of EM programme;
- supporting the promotion and capacity building for cooperative activities, sharing of best practices.

To achieve the programme aims, funding mechanisms and management structures were put in place. EM JPs and related activities of student and scholar mobility, curriculum development and consortia cooperation received separate budgets and targets. The Erasmus Mundus Unit of the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC of the European Commission) together with the Directorate-

General International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) were assigned the responsibility of the strategic management, and the evaluation of the programme, whereas the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) is held responsible for the day-to-day management and administration of the programme, selection of projects, and collection of data and reports from beneficiary organisations. National Structures (NS) of Bologna countries are responsible for promoting awareness about the programme among HEIs, their participation in EM, as well as for providing ad hoc ongoing support to HEIs involved in EM activities.

### **Erasmus Mundus as ‘high-quality’ product**

In the policy arena EM JPs have been referred to as ‘high-quality’ programmes. While that has not been explicitly defined in policy documents, one might argue that the descriptive elements of the programme give an indication as to how high-quality is constructed and what that would mean in the context of EM JPs. Due to the EM label of ‘high-quality’ programme, it is important to analyse aspects and characteristics of its quality, and trace how they contributed to the overall discourse and practise of JP programmes and their quality.

The assumptions put forward at the outset of EM programme and the criteria used by European actors managing the selection of projects stipulate the following: *integration of study programmes through joint curriculum provided by at least three European institutions, joint criteria for admissions and examinations, student mobility to at least two institutions, award of joint, double or multiple degrees and common tuition fees.* In addition, EMs were to be selected “*on the basis of the quality of the proposed training and hosting of students*” (EP and EU Council, 2003, p. 4). The extension of the programme in 2008 was consistent with the objective of excellence. The *quality of studies* together with the *quality of student reception arrangements* and a competitive scholarship scheme in order to attract the ‘*best*’ students was emphasized. *Transparent joint admissions procedures* are seen as facilitating equity based access to the programme (EP and EU Council, 2008, p. 92). Appropriate *organizational arrangements* for information provision, facilities, accommodation, services regarding visas, and other services had to be set up. Rules had to be followed for the selection procedure of grant beneficiaries. “*Stringent self-evaluation procedures*” (ibid.) as well as *external peer review* to ensure high quality of programmes were reinforced in the policy document. As will be shown later, many of the EM programme principles and elements indicated above feature in the practice of JPs.

Each stage of the EM programme has undergone both an interim and final evaluation followed by a set of recommendations for further implementation and development of the programme. For the purposes of this study, I particularly paid attention to and analysed how the quality of EM was addressed and measured in the evaluation process. It was found that the evaluations focused on programme relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and added value, and also on certain impacts at different levels (personal, institutional and inter-institutional, system, EHEA, and its cooperation with third countries). For instance, the ex post evaluation (European Commission, 2009) of the first stage of the programme (2004-2008) undertaken on behalf of DG Education and Culture by ECOTEC-ECORYS group confirmed that EM programmes “indeed [have] been of high quality” (p. iii). The quality indicators used in the evaluation have primarily been ‘input-driven’ measures such as the profile of departments and institutions offering EM programmes, the excellence of staff and students attracted into the programmes, and academic facilities. In addition, added value to domestic course offerings, intercultural experience and a general standard of support to students have been noted. In terms of direct impact, the obvious outcomes observed were new curricula/courses. Among indirect outcomes, evaluators highlighted a strengthened ‘Europeanisation’, measured by the practical application of ECTS, increased mutual awareness of characteristics of HE systems, and increased internationalisation. The evaluation included recommendations regarding programme sustainability, a more balanced non-EU and EU student participation, and pertained to the level of curriculum integration.

In the interim evaluation of EM II (European Commission, 2012), due to some novelties in the programme and the expansion of the geographical scope of cooperation with third countries, the impact of a collaborative element of EU and third countries in the EM, the issue of ‘brain drain’ and the counterpart of sustainable development of some third country regions, the relevance of the EM programme for the specific needs of third countries were more explicitly addressed than in previous evaluations. The added value of EM was measured both at the individual level as well as the system level. At the individual level, attention was paid to the success of graduates when looking for work and/or further research positions (through a Graduate Impact Survey instrument). At the system level, the analysis took into consideration the contribution of the programme towards certain EU strategies such as the Lisbon (Council of the European Union, 2000), Europe 2020 (European Commission, 2010), and the implementation of Bologna principles at the national level.

Erasmus Mundus evaluation reports have highlighted and thus confirmed a complex nature of these programmes. In general, such JP issues as qualification recognition, the award of joint degrees, quality assurance, and financial schemes surfaced most often as the areas of contestation for these programmes. For instance the 2012-2015 Bologna report (EC, EACEA and Eurydice, 2015) revealed a lack of funding and an inflexible regulatory environment related to the recognition and QA schemes of JPs. These issues have been identified as major hindrances to the expansion of programmes of collaborative nature and were identified as requiring further attention in domestic HE policies and developments.

### *5.1.2. National legislation shifts*

Due to the increase of political attention at the European level towards the programmes of collaborative nature, and their identified complexity, national legislative boundaries were shifting in order to accommodate such forms of academic cooperation. Most EU countries adopted legislative acts regulating the provision of JPs and also addressed the most pertinent issues such as requirements, accountability, quality structures, and processes. However, some European level requirements still clashed with national ones. For instance, there were attempts to find a common funding model specifically for the EM programme. In the first phase of the EM programme the EU requested to set a common tuition fee policy for EM partner institutions. However, such a requirement was in conflict with some national systems. For instance, in Germany and Denmark, there were no fees for citizens for studying in higher education programmes, whereas in the UK, especially in England, HE tuition fees were relatively high. While in the second phase of the programme the requirement of common tuition fees was abolished, and participating universities were allowed to set the tuition fees which are in line with national regulations, varied solutions were sought by different countries. For instance, Germany made a provision that universities are allowed to charge tuition fees for EM courses. Denmark has, in 2009, adopted a political agreement on regulation and financing of EM programmes outlining the conditions for the participation of Danish HEIs in the programme and the funding mechanisms. Polish universities may charge tuition in English- taught programmes.

According to the Bologna Process implementation report (2018), the award of joint degrees is still not possible in some countries (e.g., Azerbaijan, Belarus and Croatia) due to the absence of legislation regulating the provision of joint degrees. In some countries even when the legal framework has been established, there is a lack of clear, explicit regulations on how “to operationalize the concept” (ibid., p. 246) of JPs. For instance, one of the latest European level policy developments, the

European approach to quality assurance of JPs (see also 5.3.4) is not yet permitted by the legislative framework of twenty-two national HE systems (p. 246).

### Section summary

EU institutions (EC, EUCO, EU Council), Council of Europe, UNESCO and national Ministers of education became involved in JP developments through the *policy work* promoting and supporting JPs, engaging as members in international and inter-organizational working groups, monitoring activities of reform implementation. HE reforms, policies, and actions such as the launch of a model JP programme (EM) took place in the policy work. Financial instruments were put forth for the promotion, development, and monitoring of the implementation of JPs. EHEA countries were urged to remove national obstacles, increase the offer of integrated curricula followed by certain adjustments in national legal systems regulating the provision, and accreditation of JPs as well as solving recognition matters. The progress of these developments was continuously monitored both at the national and European level. Collaboration and consultation with key HE stakeholders (representatives of HEIs, students, employers, quality agencies) was used as a vehicle to mobilize the political agenda, to secure stakeholder buy-in, engagement in JPs and developments that were necessary for spreading and sustaining these high profile programmes.

Such a sustained interest in JPs from policy makers indicates both the strategic and political importance ascribed to collaborative programmes. The level of involvement of both EU level organizations and national authorities of HE represents a politically driven process of engagement with JPs taking place at a macro-level. It may be referred as a ‘political work’ in progress within the EHEA undertaken by actors at a macro-level. It involves *a mobilization of political, regulatory and financial support for the institutionalization of JP practice. As a result, the JP vision and profile, its purposes and elements were defined, and standards for new practice were outlined.* Changes in national HE legislation to support an emerging practice were initiated. The policy work (section 5.1.) explicates how EU and national level actors engaged in purposive actions to institutionalize JPs and their practice (section 5.2.). It represents one type of activity or praxis in the institutional work of JP practice in which JP programme identity and profile was constructed. As I argued, in the policy work this form of collaboration among HEIs was envisioned to contribute to the *enhancement of HE quality*, and consequently to a more attractive and competitive EHEA globally. Policy was employed to confer a ‘normative’ status of excellence to JPs especially via the EM label.

The development of JPs and the creation of JP practice were driven by a projective-strategic agency of macro-level actors. It is important to note that political actions both contributed to the environment of institutional complexity in which JPs operate, and at the same time attempted to resolve contestation and address challenges pertaining to JPs, thus potentially decreasing institutional complexity. For instance, the multiplicity of purposes and roles assigned to JPs in addition to national variations in HE legal systems, requirements to automatically recognize parts of JP studies undertaken by students at partner institutions, validate quality of JPs via external programme accreditation scheme contributed to the complexity of JP practice. A follow-up policy work in the form of national legislation adjustments, the European approach for QA of JPs (EAQAJP) was undertaken in order to address issues surrounding the recognition aspects of JP programmes, in light of the variations in national legal requirements for the provision and validation of these programmes.

The projective-strategic agency of actors has the potential to both increase and decrease the institutional complexity of a particular phenomenon. The complexity increases when an emerging institution is envisioned by actors to address multiple goals, and the practice is undertaken in highly varied institutional environments across national borders. The complexity may reduce when political actors work collaboratively with key stakeholders in the field to define and design a common set of elements and characteristics of a new practice and its standards. Steps are taken to secure support for the emerging institution by promoting its common elements and standards; to engage in advocacy and monitoring activities; and to promote common legal principles guiding the implementation of new practice.

## **5.2. A current practice of joint programmes in the European Higher Education Area: characteristics and scope**

Multiple models of JPs circulate in the EHEA, leading to the award of double, multiple or joint degrees, a brand programme of EM. The emergent understanding of JPs promoted by the Bologna Process developments in the policy work “refer to inter-institutional arrangements” (EC, EACEA and Eurydice, 2018, p.245) as “a study programme which has been jointly developed by two or more international universities” (ibid.; JOINTDEGREE, n.d.). The latest Bologna implementation report (EC, EACEA and Eurydice, 2018) provides the following definition of a joint programme:

Joint programmes are usually inter-institutional arrangements among higher education institutions leading to a joint degree. Parts of joint programmes



undertaken by students at partner institutions are recognised automatically by the other partner institutions. (p. 285)

The following key aspects of JPs are identified in European level HE documents, circles of HEIs involved in JPs, as well as in HE research: the international nature of programmes (through student and faculty mobility), shared resources (faculty, facilities, curriculum), recognition of studies (courses, exams, degrees), joint processes (admission, examinations, diplomas), and an integrated curriculum (JOINTDEGREE, n.d.; Tauch and Rauhvagers, 2002; Yerevan Communiqué, 2015). Partner universities offering JPs may form a consortium. Due to differences in national legislative environments regulating the provision of joint degree programmes, a consortium may be awarding a different configuration of degrees for the same JP. Students may be receiving either national degrees from partner institutions, thus double or multiple degrees depending on the number of partner institutions, or a jointly conferred degree.

As explained earlier, joint study programmes, leading to the award of double, multiple or joint degrees, as a form of collaboration among European universities emerged as early as the late eighties, and early nineties. Earlier research on JPs noted that since then the interest to develop and offer JPs among HEIs, especially cross-border programmes of collaborative nature, has become a trend not only in European higher education but also worldwide (Michael and Balraj, 2003; Obst, Kuder and Banks, 2011). This study indicates that while programmes of collaborative nature in the policy realm continue to be seen of strategic importance for the EHEA, contributing to the attractiveness of Europe as a study destination, and are increasingly deployed by HEIs as a form of internationalization, they remain small in scope. Some statistics on the scope of JPs indicate that on average joint and double degree programmes enrol fewer than 25 students (Obst, Kuder and Banks, 2011). As reported in Bologna implementation reports (2012, 2015) which includes data on 47 countries and over 4,000 higher education institutions operating in the EHEA, less than 25% of HE establishments are estimated to be participating in joint programmes (EC, EACEA and Eurydice, 2015). The same percentage was indicated in 2018 report, thus showing no expansion (EC, EACEA and Eurydice, 2018). The majority of countries estimate that only up to 5% of their institutions issue joint degrees (ibid., p. 246). This figure doubled from the previous Bologna reporting periods. The majority of costs are currently met either by European funding mechanisms or by HEIs, and only half of Bologna countries indicate having some support mechanisms at the central level. The *Trends 2015* survey conducted by the EUA reported a much higher university involvement with JPs. According to this survey 37% of institutions offer international joint

programmes at the first cycle of studies (Bachelor's) and 70% at the second cycle of studies (Master's) (Sursock 2015, p. 43). The data on the overall expansion of JPs in the EHEA, however, is lacking accuracy (EACEA, personal communication, 9 September, 2019).

The EM programme which is funded and monitored by EU institutions covers only a very small part of HE enrolments. For instance, in 2012 all EM courses across European universities enrolled 2,220 students (1,923 at the Master's level and 297 at the Doctorate level) (European Commission, n.d.). This amounts to a 0.01 % share of students enrolled in tertiary education of the 28 EU countries. While the EM could have created a brand of 'excellent programmes', such low enrolments in the programme in addition to promotion and the financial support of the EU, as well as a special place in the national systems and university structures make these programmes rather exclusive.

Despite some obvious advantages that JPs bring to beneficiaries (students, HEIs, labour market, etc.), there continue to be certain challenges associated with this type of collaborative activity. A Bologna report (2018) indicates that "the uncertain legal situation continues to play a role in keeping the take up of joint degrees at a relatively low level" (EC, EACEA and Eurydice, p. 246). Legislation constraints are brought up also by respondent HEIs in EUA trend data (Sursock, 2015), but the most prominent issue, according to JP providers, has to do with the integration of joint programmes into the institutions. The same observation was made in an EUA study on joint programmes a decade ago, i.e. in 2004 (*ibid.* p. 44).

### **Section summary**

The review of current JP practice in the EHEA indicates that while we can observe an emerging profile of joint programmes and a sustained interest at the supranational level to support the intensity and acceleration of the collaborative activity of JPs among HEIs, multiple models and configurations in the degree award structure remain. Both exogenous factors in the regulatory environments of HE systems as well as endogenous factors of integrating JPs in the organizational structures of HEIs are found to affect further JP developments. The following section will trace the activities undertaken by the inter-organizational professional networks in order to help HEIs to manage the identified complexities and spur the developments of JPs and their quality practice.

### **5.3. Constructing professional networks and associations, developing joint programme quality guidelines, standards, and best practice manuals**

In order to enhance the visibility, to promote JPs, and to address the identified complexity of running JPs, the EU invested in the formation of professional networks and associations and so-called soft law mechanisms such as the development of guidelines, indicators, and benchmarking of best practices. It has funded activities of networks and consortia which created platforms focusing on JP management, administration, and training of HE staff involved in JPs, as well as the sharing of best practices. As Papatsiba (2014) notes, a number of European level as well as international organisational actors such as the European Commission (EC), the European University Association (EUA), the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), the European Network in Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Consortium for Accreditation and UNESCO “have championed joint programme and degree developments by European HEIs” (p. 44). The novelty of the phenomenon and the complexities found both at the system level and HEIs regarding the development and implementation of JPs spurred a number of activities that were carried out also by associations of HEIs such as the EUA and specialized networks to identify best practices, design manuals, guides and offer professional development opportunities for those on the ‘ground level’ directly engaged with JPs.

In this section, I turn my attention primarily to the analysis of quality-driven processes which were key to the formation of JP quality discourse and practice. The selected documents and processes include a development of a soft legal instrument such as the ESG which is widely supported and promoted at the EU and national level. In addition, written guidelines and recommendations such as EMNEM (EUA, 2006), EMQA (Blakemore *et al.*, 2012) which were developed and disseminated by professional associations and networks of HEIs based on their experiences with JP provision are analysed. The formation of professional associations and networks and the work undertaken by those organizations is one of the activities through which JP practice was co-created and maintained. These developments are the ‘*building blocks*’ of institutional work of JP quality practice. They provide us with insights into the organizational praxis of JP providers, the normative orientations as well as cultural cognitive elements embedded in best practices that are guided by regulatory pressures. Attention is paid to the main actors behind those developments, the rhetoric used for constructing quality definitions, the activities of quality practice promoted and the intentions attributed to those activities. A deeper understanding is gained about JPs, their quality, and practice.

### *5.3.1. Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*

In 2003, Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (later ENQA) through its members, and in cooperation with the EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB<sup>4</sup>, to develop “an agreed set of standards, procedures, and guidelines on quality assurance” (ENQA, 2009, p. 5). Following the recommendations of the Council of the EU (1998) on European co-operation in quality assurance in higher education and the Bologna Declaration, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was established in 2000. In 2004, the General Assembly of the Network transformed itself into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Its primary role remains to promote European co-operation in the field of quality assurance (ENQA, n.d.). In response to the European Ministers of Education call in 2003, ENQA through its members, in consultation and co-operation with the other E4 Group organizations, the European Commission and various other relevant networks such as ECA and CEE (ENQA, 2007, p. 6) drafted the ESG. In 2005, The European Ministers of Education endorsed the work of ENQA by adopting the ESG. National quality assurance agencies that demonstrate substantial adherence to the values and principles of the ESG in their activities could become members of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR, n.d.)

As it was discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, academics and HE professionals continued debating about the multiplicity of quality definitions and the intangible nature of quality due to the evolutionary state of quality discourse and practice: the historical and cultural heritage of HE systems and a variety of ways to address quality, e.g., enhance, control, monitor, assess, evaluate, review, assure or simply manage (Rozsnyai, 2010). An adoption of the ESG was meant to find a common ground among HE stakeholders for shared values and principles underlying quality practice. While the ESG are rather generic, not specific to JPs, due to the involvement of key HE stakeholders, the spread and the importance of the guidelines in the EHEA, they are foundational to our understanding of JP quality discourse and practice. As Christian Thune, the president of ENQA noted in the ESG report, it has marked, the beginnings of “what is likely to be a long and possibly arduous route to the establishment of a widely shared set of underpinning values, expectations and good practice in relation to quality and its assurance”

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<sup>4</sup> also referred to as E4 group

(ENQA, 2007 p. 5) in the EHEA. Studying these underpinning values and expectations is a great example of normative orientations guiding what is ‘good practice’ related to quality work in HE.

The ESG are divided into three parts: internal QA of higher education institutions; external QA of higher education and QA of external quality assurance agencies. Since this study focuses mostly on organizational level JP quality practices and their interaction with institutional frameworks (regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements of quality practice), I primarily focus on the details of the first two parts of the ESG. With regards to the external elements of quality assurance, the ESG prescribes a cyclical practice of it. Many countries practice either programme and/or institutional accreditation. The external JP QA approach which was adopted in 2015 (please turn to sections 5.1 and 5.3.4) is to be used as a reference document for JP quality standards which are applied in external review processes and national schemes.

One of the expectations as outlined in the ESG was to facilitate the development of quality culture in the EHEA and promote mutual trust among institutions. It is anticipated that the ESG would foster the development of HEIs, their intellectual and educational achievements. The ESG attempted to outline certain elements regarding processes and structures which may be introduced and implemented at the organisational and country level regarding the assurance of quality in HE leaving HEIs and national systems space to choose how this might be accomplished.

According to the ENQA report, the intention of the ESG was to emphasize a generic rather than a narrow and prescriptive approach for the development of standards (ENQA, 2009, p. 11). Attention was paid to ‘what should be done’ in order to assure the provision of quality education rather than how it may be achieved (ibid.). The ESG emphasized institutional autonomy and responsibility regarding QA policies and procedures. It is promoted that HEIs would exercise their autonomy by implementing quality procedures and employing metrics which would be dependent on their own interpretations of quality and the interests of key stakeholders.

The ESG focuses on the teaching and learning mission of HE. ‘Quality assurance’ in the ESG was introduced as an ‘umbrella’ term, although not an unambiguous one. A review of basic underlying principles and aims outlined in the ESG indicate the following dimensions of QA. Both accountability and improvement are highlighted with the notion that they may be compatible. The improvement of education and management of its quality are identified as primary tasks in QA

processes. HEIs are called to safeguard the interests of HE beneficiaries (students, employers, and society). The document acknowledges that it is important for the practice of quality to not only take into consideration the interests of students, employers, and society at large, but also for HEIs to inform the stakeholders about organisational processes and outcomes. The importance of efficient and effective organizational structures is highlighted as well as transparency and the use of external expertise. It is expected that QA processes implemented by HEIs will contribute to the development of their quality culture and by no means stifle diversity and innovation.

Seven years after the ESG was adopted, at the 2012 Bucharest meeting, HE policy makers called upon key HE stakeholders to conduct a thorough review of the ESG. The revision of the ESG had to take into account the current state of HE, i.e. all major developments affecting HE since 2005, e.g., various Bologna-driven HE developments such as the acceptance of comparable qualification frameworks, the increased awareness and promotion of student-centred learning and teaching, and the importance of identifying and assessing learning outcomes in the process of teaching and learning. In addition, it had to address the need for flexible learning paths and the recognition of competencies gained outside formal education, the increased internationalisation of HE, the spread of digital learning, and new forms of delivery in order “to improve their [ESG] clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope” (ENQA, 2015, p. 3) and also avoid multiple interpretations. Additional organizations such as Education International (EI), the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), and Businesseurope were invited to contribute to the revisions of the ESG.

Taking into consideration the HE developments presented above, the revised ESG pay more attention to the *fit-for-purpose*<sup>5</sup> concept of quality and the appropriateness of structures and processes needed for quality provision of education. A strategic approach to quality management and the engagement of all stakeholders is noted. Student-centred teaching, professionalism in student assessment and attention to the learning environment is promoted. The language of meeting programme objectives and learning outcomes is in line with the discourse around the outcome-based approach to education, whereas programmes need to correspond to the appropriate level of qualifications, both national and European.

Table V-4 provides a summary of the main intentions, quality constructions, principles and activities as outlined in both editions of the ESG<sup>6</sup>. A full comparison

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<sup>5</sup> For most common quality concepts and their linkage to practice see Appendix B and the discussion in chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> In the table a regular font is used for the ESG 2005 edition, *italic font – for the ESG 2015*

of all the changes to ESG in 2015 is offered in the EQUIP report (2015). ENQA through its member organizations, i.e. quality assurance agencies in the EHEA, is the primary ‘keeper and promoter’ of the ESG, and consequently the emerging European dimension of quality assurance, the elements of which are outlined in the ESG.

**Table V-4. Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area**

2005/2015			
<b>ENQA</b> <b>European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education</b>	<b>EUA</b> <b>European University Association</b>	<b>EURASHE</b> <b>European Association of Institutions in Higher Education</b>	<b>ESIB<sup>7</sup></b> <b>National Unions of Students in Europe</b>
together with EC (European Commission), ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation), and CEE (Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies) <i>together with EI (Education International), EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education), BusinessEurope</i>			
<b>Intentions</b>		<b>Quality constructed as</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitate (<i>and support</i>) the development of quality culture in the EHEA</li> <li>- Promote mutual trust among institutions</li> <li>- Develop standards for the assurance of quality education provision</li> <li>- Focus on the teaching and learning mission of HEIs (<i>and learning environment</i>)</li> <li>- Foster the development of HEIs (their intellectual and educational achievement)</li> <li>- Inform the stakeholders about organisational processes and outcomes</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Institutional autonomy (to choose quality procedures, act within HEIs national system)</li> <li>- Institutional responsibility (assuring quality of education, providing accountability according to national quality frameworks)</li> <li>- Enhancement (continuous improvement)</li> <li>- Accountability (transparency, publicity)</li> <li>- Management driven</li> <li>- What, not how approach</li> <li>- Fit-for-purpose</li> <li>- ‘Embraced by all’ (students, academic staff, institutional leadership and management)</li> </ul>	

<sup>7</sup> (currently ESU) European Students’ Union

### **Quality practice (as justification of institutional autonomy)**

*Dealing with the areas 'vital for successful quality provision and learning environment':*

Principles:

- Considering stakeholder (students, employers, society) interests/*involving internal and external stakeholders*
- Efficient and effective organisational structures/*Appropriate structures and processes*
- Multi-layered (Internal QA, External QA, QA of External QA)

Elements:

- QA policy, strategy and procedures (formal, public, available, *part of strategic management*)
- Programmes and awards: *Design and approval of programmes (formal mechanisms for approval, periodic review and monitoring, meeting objectives and intended outcomes, qualification corresponding to the correct level)*
- Student assessment (published criteria, regulations and procedures applied consistently); *student-centred learning, teaching and assessment*
- Resources: HR-teaching staff (qualified and competent, *fair and transparent processes for recruitment and development and laying-off*); Learning resources and student support (adequate, appropriate, *accessible*)
- Information management (relevant information)
- Public information (*clear, accurate, objective, up-to date, accessible*)
- *Cyclical external quality assurance*

As the review of the ESG document shows, the purposes of QA are manifold (also summarized in the 'intentions' part of the table above). It may be noted, that while the ESG claims a more generic approach to quality practice which aims to serve as a point of reference, the adoption of 'standard' language likewise as in EAQJJP (2015), sends a message to HE actors for compliance. Huisman and Westerheijden (2010) noted that outcomes of the developments and achievements which have taken place at the supranational level in relation to European cooperation in HE quality related issues were compliance driven. Huisman and Westerheijden agree that while the ESG contributed to "achieving consensus on good practices regarding quality assurance" (ibid., p. 64), there "has been too much stress on compliance to rigid procedures and mechanisms, at the cost of a focus on quality improvement and the student learning experience" (p. 63). QA agencies, in order to gain political legitimacy nationally and internationally, as well as to secure membership in ENQA and EQAR, had to adhere to the ESG. The MAP-ESG (ENQA, 2011) project launched by the E4 Group to study the implementation and application of the ESG in 47 Bologna signatory states confirmed the tension



between the ESG serving as a reference point and as a compliance tool. The latter has not been explicitly identified among original intentions of the ESG, nonetheless featured as an unexpected outcome of adopting the ESG.

HE provisions including cross-border education are subject to multi-purpose QA promoted in the ESG, the internal and external QA structures outlined, and the institutional rights for autonomy. The reference to institutional autonomy in the ESG, nonetheless, has the undertone of compliance of acting within HEIs national systems which adhered to the ESG principles. There is an expectation from the policy-making institutions and quality agencies conducting external programme evaluations about the alignment of JP practices with the ESG. At the same time, according to HE policy researchers, the other two objectives of the ESG, managing and enhancing quality on the ‘shop-floor-level’, educational processes and student learning experiences at HEIs were left at the periphery (Huisman and Westerheijden, 2010). The researchers commented that the activities of the key players in QA developments thus remained distant from organisational activities (ibid.).

### *5.3.2. Quality assurance of joint programmes*

JP quality-related developments in the EHEA involved numerous efforts of key European HE stakeholders with vested interests in JPs to develop support structures, and guidelines for the development and management of such study programmes, including self-assessment activities, frameworks guiding an external evaluation, and the accreditation processes of such study programmes. To a large extent, these developments incorporated the experience of higher education providers with cross-border JPs and were based on best practice examples, therefore providing insights into emerging normative and cultural-cognitive elements driving the developments of quality practice in JPs. In this section I review documents produced by three key players: EMNEM in 2006 by EUA, Guidelines and Guide by JOIMAN and EMQA by DG EAC. Methodologies, guidelines and handbooks were developed and produced for higher education institutions regarding JP quality issues and its ‘practice’. In this study I treat quality definitions and activities outlined in the above documents as instantiations of quality praxis and map them out against the ESG in order to discern the emerging patterns of JP quality practice.

In early 2000, the European University Association (EUA) representing universities and national rectors’ conferences in European countries (currently 48 countries) engaged in the activities that would support HEIs to address and

possibly balance rising external demands for accountability and quality enhancement of education provisions (also identified in the ESG). The association initiated collaborative projects around the theme of quality culture in European universities including internal QA of JPs. In 2004, the EUA published the so called 10 Golden Rules for New Joint Master Programmes (Nickel, Zdebel and Westerheijden, 2009). Scholars noted that these rules brought “together the experience from the EUA pilot project and [made] empirically-based recommendations to HEIs which [were] considering developing joint degrees” (p. 33). Despite the fact that these rules had no legally binding force, researchers noted (ibid.) that they served HEIs as guidelines because of the authority of the actors responsible for them, and at that time they were among the most notable ones. Some countries, e.g., Germany has adopted them in its Rectors’ Conference “Recommendations on the Development of Double Degrees and Joint Degrees” (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz (HRK), 2005). In 2006, drawing on the outcomes of 2003-2004 Joint Master’s Project, the EUA developed an approach to internal QA for joint Master programmes (EUA, 2006a). The EUA produced the European Masters New Evaluation Methodology (EMNEM) which included guidelines for quality enhancement in study programmes of collaborative, inter-institutional nature. The guidelines have been drafted with the primary aim of helping HEIs involved in developing and running JPs to enhance and further develop the quality of their projects (ibid). The Guidelines claim a generic approach to quality of JPs to avoid the prescriptive or normative position, promoting the interpretative approach where HEIs define what a successful programme could be, what quality would mean, and what indicators would need to be applied. At the same time the Guidelines defined some main principles, put forth certain assumptions and elements of JP programme, criteria for development and implementation of such collaborative programmes.

A specific nature of JPs is highlighted, with quality being constructed both as *fitness-for-purpose* and *fitness-of-purpose*<sup>8</sup>. There is an emphasis on shared understanding among HEIs regarding the concept and aim of the programme, common and agreed outcomes of the programme, and an integrated responsibility for QA processes. The Steering Committee responsible for the Guidelines had been convinced that the concern for quality “should underpin all aspects of programme” (ibid, p. 7) as well as cycles of programme development and implementation, that is “its entire life” (ibid.). Continuous improvement, with a process-based and system-oriented approach towards quality in JPs, is promoted.

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<sup>8</sup> For most common quality concepts and their linkage to practice see Appendix B.

In the EMNEM guidelines QA is constructed as “a shared and integrated responsibility of the network as well as a responsibility to be taken by each participating institution” (p. 10). Quality practice integrates assessment, assurance and enhancement-driven activities. Assurance in EMNEM is linked with the overall implementation of the programme, whether set objectives and targets are being met / achieved. It is tied to the concept of *fitness-for-purpose*, i.e. whether the curriculum will achieve the stated objectives and/or teaching is suitable for programme objectives to be met. Assessment and evaluation activities are seen as ex post procedures for validating the concept of the programme and identifying its strengths and weaknesses. Enhancement-driven activities are follow-up mechanisms taken to eliminate weaknesses and errors and optimise processes. A more detailed overview of EMNEM, quality intentions and definitions, quality practice, its principles, criteria, and activities can be found in Table V-5.

**Table V-5. European Masters new evaluation methodology guidelines for higher education institutions (EMNEM)**

<b>Guidelines for Quality Enhancement in European Joint Master Programmes 2006 EUA</b>	
<b>Intentions</b>	<b>Quality constructed as</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assess, assure and enhance quality</li> <li>- Develop and enhance JPs</li> <li>- Build an inter-institutional quality culture</li> <li>- Reflect on the specific nature of JPs</li> <li>- Reflect on the implications of quality enhancement</li> <li>- Generic and interpretative approach (neither prescriptive nor normative)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fitness-of-purpose and fitness-for-purpose</li> <li>- Holistic and relational (all aspects, all cycles of programme: aims, concept, implementation, monitoring)</li> <li>- Process-oriented (linking the elements of quality cycle)</li> <li>- Improvement-oriented</li> <li>- The quality of the whole rather than the sum of its parts</li> <li>- Context specific</li> <li>- Successful programme (relevant quality indicators set by HEIs)</li> </ul> <p>QA as an integrated responsibility of the network and a responsibility of each HEI</p>

### **Quality practice (principles, criteria and activities)**

Principles and assumptions for quality programmes:

cooperation; coordination; commitment to quality; shared understanding (regarding the aim; concept of the programme; quality meaning and quality elements; programme's strengths and weaknesses); effective governance; transparency of structures and decision-making processes; knowledge of partner institutions strengths; shared academic values; trust and respect for diversity; competence and capacity of programme providers to assess, assure and enhance quality; clear strategies and effective communication; trustworthy quality assurance processes and procedures.

Criteria and Activities (Assessment/Assurance/Enhancement):

- 'ex-ante' procedure for a sound 'concept' of the programme (ensuring a feasibility of programme concept for students and institutions)
- coherence and consistency of curricula
- common and agreed outcomes;
- linking the elements of a quality cycle: (valid, explicit, adequate, plausible, and shared) objectives, (fitting) concept, (true) implementation, (candid) quality monitoring, (timely) improvement
- implementation, e.g., curriculum, admission policy will achieve the stated/set objectives; selected type of teaching suits to achieve set objectives (assurance)
- 'ex-post' procedure for validating the concept on the basis of empirical information and data, identifying programme's strengths and weaknesses (assessment/evaluation)
- quality management system (e.g., records, data, feedback (from students, teachers, labour market), follow-up mechanisms for enhancement (e.g., eliminating weaknesses and errors, optimising processes)

Similarly to EUA's project, the JOIMAN network comprising of fifteen European universities and three Erasmus Mundus national structures with representation of eleven EU countries, coordinated by the University of Bologna, set out to offer HE stakeholders management and administrative solutions related to the development and implementation of JPs. Among many other activities such as conferences, workshops, seminars, etc., the network has published guidelines and good practice reports such as "How to Manage Joint Study Programmes" (JOIMAN, 2011) and "A Guide to Developing and Running Joint Programmes at Bachelor's and Master's level" (JOIMAN, 2012). As stated in the guidelines:

the prime objective of establishing joint programmes should be to improve the quality of the education and research the degree encompasses. The result of two or more institutions joining forces to offer a study programme should be a programme of higher academic standard than the institution would achieve separately. (JOIMAN, 2012, p. 5)

The JOIMAN guidelines emphasize the added value element of JPs. It is linked with a number of outcomes such as, for example, expanded internationalisation, improved educational and research collaboration, increased employability and so on. Both publications developed by JOIMAN members included sections on QA of JPs. QA is used as a defining term for quality-related issues and processes. For quality-related practices, academic and administrative aspects of the programme are distinguished. A coherent, jointly developed curriculum, elements of regular programme evaluation and assessment by major stakeholders, and joint QA procedures for joint elements of programmes are promoted. Similar to the EUA's Guidelines, JOIMAN Guidelines differentiate between phases of programme development and implementation with the acknowledgment that different activities may need to be carried to address the developmental needs of a programme. It is the institution's responsibility to have systems in place which ensure the success of collaborative programmes, help to predict the development of the programme, make adjustments and, if necessary, based on data to discontinue the programme. JOIMAN guides offer specific advice regarding all major elements of the programme such as admission, curriculum, mobility, award certification, programme evaluation and follow-up. The guidelines note the importance of transparency via the means of information and communication, familiarity with partner institutions processes including QA, mutual recognition of coursework and common structures for programme development, e.g., committees, boards with representation of all partner institutions.

**Table V-6. JOIMAN guidelines and good practices on how to manage joint study programmes<sup>9</sup>**

<b>Intentions</b>	<b>Quality constructed as</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Success of the programme</li> <li>- Smooth functioning of the programme</li> <li>- Maintaining a positive climate among partner institutions</li> <li>- Attaining JP's objectives</li> <li>- Ensuring accessibility, transparency (admissions)</li> <li>- Avoiding high dropout rate</li> <li>- Adjustment of curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assurance</li> <li>- Two-dimensional:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>administrative</i> (ensuring that rules and regulations are respected)</li> <li>• <i>academic</i> (content focus)</li> </ul> </li> <li>A programme is:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- up-to-date</li> <li>- respondent to student needs and expectations</li> <li>- has a low drop-out rate</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> A section on quality assurance related issues

### Quality practice

A regular discussion of the objectives of a JP and the ways to attain these

Quality procedures and criteria related to:

1. **Admission** (clarity of information about the course and the selection procedure; ensuring students' expected level)
2. **Curriculum** (coherent and holistic programme of study (jointly developed), guidelines of student workload implemented, learning outcomes at programme, module and teaching units defined)
3. **Mobility** (guidelines (also before entering), individual counselling, info (website, brochures, flyers, timetables)
4. **Awarding of certification** (agreed within the consortium)
5. **Evaluation and assessment** (an effective, updated and comprehensive evaluation system; regular evaluation of academic activities and services; made by different stakeholders (students, academic staff, labour market)
6. **Follow-up system** (e.g., QA committee, a joint board, student evaluation and assessment)

**Table V-7. JOIMAN guide to developing and running programmes at Bachelor and Master's level<sup>10</sup>**

Intentions	Quality constructed as
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assure quality</li> <li>- Make adjustments</li> <li>- Cancel the programme, if necessary</li> <li>- Predict</li> <li>- Transparency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Added value</li> <li>- Institutional responsibility</li> <li>- Assurance</li> <li>- Two-dimensional: administrative and academic</li> </ul>
<h3>Quality practice</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information (such as course descriptions), familiarity with partner institution procedures for QA and local processes</li> <li>• A coherent study programme</li> <li>• A system and procedures for regular evaluation of the programme and its parts (jointly developed, students and teaching staff views):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Typical course quality assurance procedures applied (as for any other courses at HEI)</li> <li>- Approval/recognition of courses by all partner HEIS as part of the system</li> <li>- Joint QA procedures for joint processes (admission, diploma)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• A structure for development and QA (e.g., a programme board, steering committee, representation from all partner Is, functions and roles described in the initial agreement)</li> </ul>	

<sup>10</sup> A section on quality assurance related issues from the template

### *5.3.3. Erasmus Mundus quality assurance model*

In 2007 a suggested QA model specifically for Erasmus Mundus courses was introduced in the Interim Evaluation report. That same year DG EAC contracted research and consulting organisations to design tools which would provide “a mechanism to explore, individually or collaboratively, where excellence is being demonstrated in an Erasmus Mundus Course, or whether a planned course is covering all of the key aspects of excellence” (ECOTEC, 2008, p. 1). A website was developed which includes Erasmus Mundus management and quality tools for joint graduate level programmes of an international nature. A comprehensive handbook of quality was released in 2008, and then an updated version of the handbook of excellence for Erasmus Mundus quality assessment came out in 2012. Quality benchmarks and indicators together with best practice examples may be found so that HEIs can self-assess their services. These developments explicitly focus on a branding element of EM programme excellence, their special place and vision in the EHEA and globally. The handbook of excellence covers in detail the processes and procedures for the development, provision, management, administration, and sustainability of these high-profile educational programmes. Suggested ‘quality actions’ and best practice examples serve as signposts in the “arduous route to the establishment of a widely shared set of underpinning values, expectations and good practice” (ENQA, 2007, p.5) of quality and its assurance in the EHEA and, in particular, quality of cross-border Erasmus Mundus joint study programmes. The official EU Erasmus+ programme webpage (European Commission, n.d.) disseminates not only reports of quality assurance developments in the EHEA, but also what is considered to be good practice in EM programmes.

EMQA supports the vision of EM as a ‘programme of excellence’ promoted at the time of its establishment in 2003 and its extension in 2008 (see section 5.1.1). According to Harvey’s (2009) dimensions, this falls in the category of exceptional quality, of very high standards. EMQA emphasizes that quality practice in the EM context needs to be built on ‘jointness’, the quality of structure and processes, ‘enactment’ of the EM vision, upholding of standards, effectiveness and efficiency, meeting the objectives (teaching and learning) and achievement of learning outcomes. For a summary of the EM quality approach, please see Table V-8 and also Appendix G.

**Table V-8. Erasmus Mundus quality assessment (EMQA)**

Handbook of Quality 2008 / <i>Handbook of Excellence 2012</i> <sup>11</sup>	
<b>Intentions</b>	<b>Quality constructed as</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exploring where excellence is being demonstrated (gathering of data)</li> <li>- Exploring whether a planned course is covering key aspects of excellence (checking)</li> <li>- Focusing on <b>quality of structure and processes ('jointness'), outcomes and impacts of quality</b></li> <li>- Building overall 'picture' of the journey towards excellence</li> <li>- Identifying strengths and areas for improvement in order to build overall excellence</li> <li>- <i>Meeting and maximizing teaching and learning objectives</i></li> <li>- <i>Achieving learning outcomes</i></li> <li>- <i>Upholding standards</i></li> <li>- <i>Following-up/continuously improving</i></li> <li>- <i>Delivering programme efficiently and effectively</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Excellence, highest/high quality</li> <li>- Efficiency and effectiveness</li> <li>- <i>Fit-for- purpose</i></li> <li>- <i>Improvement-oriented</i></li> <li>- <i>Delivery of value and 'enactment' of the vision</i></li> <li>- Holistic, process approach</li> </ul> <p>Four components of excellence/<i>quality 'actions'</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilities, logistics and finance (FLAF)</li> <li>• Quality of leaderships across institutions (QUIL)</li> <li>• Quality of teaching and learning (QATL)</li> <li>• Joined-up practice and integration (JUPI)</li> <li>• <i>A course vision</i></li> <li>• <i>Learning &amp; Teaching, and Staff Development Strategy</i></li> <li>• <i>Management, financial and institutional strategy</i></li> <li>• <i>Recruitment of excellent students, delivering value to them, and engaging alumni</i></li> </ul> <p>All stages: building, developing and sustaining the programme</p>

*5.3.4. External joint programme quality assurance approach*

The external assessment and review of programmes is one of the key elements in the quality practice. It is a requirement for accreditation of JPs, and thus is treated in the study as a regulatory pressure faced by JP providers. The standards and criteria used in the external evaluation process are part of the emerging JP quality

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<sup>11</sup> 2008 handbook information in the table is provided in regular font, 2012 handbook information is in italic font.



discourse and practice. The concept and process of QA as such was initially associated with the external assessment and evaluation processes in the EHEA, whereas internal QA procedures and systems became one of the focus areas in the external assessment.

The external element of QA was taken up by ECA, ENQA and national Ministers of Education via their participation in the Bologna process as well as national accreditation agencies through their engagement in ENQA and ECA activities. The external approach for JPs was initiated by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA since 2004) in the Transnational European Evaluation Project II. As (Nickel, Zdebel and Westerheijden, 2009) noted

this was particularly relevant to programme accreditation, which is a compulsory external quality assurance procedure in most of the Bologna states (Schwarz, Westerheijden 2004). A step forward internationally in the procedural reliability of programme accreditation was made in the form of the Principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes (Rauhvargers, Tauch 2004, pp. 36-37) of the umbrella organisation of European higher education accreditation agencies, the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), and the German Accreditation Council's regulations on the Accreditation of Programmes with Double Degrees and Joint Degrees (Akkreditierungsrat 2004). (p. 33)

ECA continued the work of ENQA and in 2014 it released a framework (ECA, 2014) for assessing JPs including the standards upon which the quality of JPs will be assessed using the pre-defined criteria. These include the following six standards:

**Table V-9. ECA assessment framework**

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Criteria</b>
General conditions	recognition; cooperation agreement; added value
Learning outcomes	shared by PIs; aligned with the corresponding level in the Framework for Qualifications in the EHEA; in compliance with the requirements in the subject/discipline and, where applicable, the professional field
Programme	admission criteria and selection procedures are in line with the JP level and discipline; the structure and content of the curriculum and its pedagogical approach correspond with the intended learning outcomes; credits (the distribution of credits is clear)
Internal QA system	responsibilities are shared and coordinated; stakeholder involvement; continuous improvement)

Standard	Criteria
Facilities and student support	facilities are sufficient and adequate in view of the intended learning outcomes; student support contributes to the achievement of the learning outcomes and, where applicable, to designing individual study pathways; adequate student services to facilitate mobility (e.g., housing, guidance for incoming and outgoing students, visa issues, etc.)
Teaching and learning	staff (quantity, qualifications, professional and international experience, etc.) is adequate for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes; examination regulations and the assessment of the achievements of learning outcomes are applied in a consistent manner among PIs and oriented to the intended learning outcomes; graduation guarantee for students and financial provisions; the programme can demonstrate that the learning outcomes are achieved).

While ‘sliced’ in somewhat different categories than the guidelines reviewed earlier in this chapter, a lot of the same key words are used in the standards to describe quality concepts, processes, and principles, e.g., added value, stakeholder involvement, student support, fit-for-purpose approach for staffing, pedagogy, and facilities. There is clearly a lot more focus on the learning outcomes but also compliance and upholding of standards of a certain level and type of studies, etc. through acknowledgment that any additional criteria and assessment procedures which may be in place at a national level would need to be followed by HEIs aiming for a JP accreditation. An internal QA system for a JP is one of the standards set in the ECA framework.

### Section summary

As the review and analysis of quality related developments in the EHEA shows, the process involved numerous efforts of key European HE stakeholders with vested interests in JPs to develop JP support structures, guidelines for management and evaluation of such study programmes including internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. This process of IW resulted in co-creation and maintenance of JP quality practice which was taken up by a combination of actors: *policy forming institutions* both at the European and national level such as European Commission, Ministers of Education; *academic communities* represented through various associations and professional networks such as EUA, JOIMAN, *students* through ESU as well as *other HE stakeholder organizations* such as EI, BusinessEurope, QA associations and networks such as ECA, ENQA and EQAR. A lot of this work was facilitated and carried out by intermediary organizations (e.g.,

EUA, EURASHE, ENQA, ECA, JOIMAN) representing peer institutions such as HEIs, QA agencies, JP providers. As a result of this work, JP guidelines and manuals for its quality practices were developed. To a large extent these guidelines and manuals were based on everyday experience of JP providers, their best practices which consequently contributed to identification of internal aspects of QA. Various programme processes such as design, implementation, and assessment were modelled to also outline external QA elements. The work produced by these intermediary organizations informed policy recommendations and decisions on quality praxis and were incorporated in the ESG and EAQAJP documents that were adopted in Bologna ministerial meetings. These documents together with EMNEM, EMQA and JOIMAN guides shape the construction and enactment of quality praxis in the EHEA. ESG and EAQAJP represent formal, regulatory elements of JP practice and its normative orientations to be followed and incorporated in national HE systems of Bologna Member States. Guidelines produced by intermediary organizations incorporate those normative orientations about elements of ‘appropriate’ JP quality practice as well as carry out cultural-cognitive elements of best practice identified by JP providers. A recursive interaction is observed between activities undertaken by policy making institutions and intermediary organizations at the macro level, and JP providers at the meso-level in co-creating the JP quality practice.

The emerging field-level JP quality discourse and practice is presented in the following section.

#### **5.4. Joint programme quality discourse and practice**

As the analysis of quality-related developments provided in section 5.3 suggests, the emergence of a JP quality discourse and co-creation of JP quality practice in addition to policy work was also undertaken by intermediary organizations and included:

- (a) creation of structures such as networks, associations, and a register composed of mutually recognized actors, either HEIs offering JPs or national QA agencies;
- (b) development, dissemination and promotion of quality guidelines and handbooks by these newly created structures.

Those guidelines to a large extent were based on the inter-organizational arrangements and ‘best practice’ of JP providers (meso- and micro-level).

As a result of the above-mentioned activities certain standards and principles for the design, implementation and management of JPs and their quality processes were set forth and promoted. These embody particular normative and cultural-cognitive orientations of JP praxis.

The review of quality-related developments in the EHEA confirms the ongoing tensions of accountability and improvement inherent to the quality discourse and practices in HE which might to some extent be resolved through a ‘best practice’ approach. QA as an overarching term gained prominence albeit not without unambiguity. QA is seen both as respect for an institutional autonomy and responsibility to address the demands for accountability (via external assessment and evaluation) and enhancement (via internal quality systems). External quality schemes and guidelines developed by multiple actors set certain standards and expectations for the quality of JPs. While JP quality is mainly being constructed as *fitness-for-purpose*, compliance is required with national and European quality frameworks (assessment criteria, procedures) as well as rules and regulations guiding the design (the scope and the level), and the implementation (resources and the awarding of the degree, QA) of JPs.

JP quality activities promoted in various guidelines produced by university associations, professional networks, and European institutions are grounded in the inter-organizational arrangements and experiences, often referred to as ‘best practice’ of collaborative programme providers. While the reviewed handbooks and guidelines include a variety of quality definitions, aims, aspects with different emphases, they serve as reference points for how quality of JPs is constructed and enacted, shaping JP quality discourse and practice. The following *common quality dimensions and aspects of JP quality practice were identified*:

1. *Quality culture* that needs to be facilitated, supported, and developed. In the JP context the focus is on the inter-institutional quality culture, shared understanding of academic cultures, quality, programme concept, aims, and outcomes as well as its strengths and weaknesses.
  - a. Quality culture is facilitated in the environment where there is *commitment* to quality, *all stakeholders* are involved, and
  - b. where activities of *assurance, assessment/evaluation and enhancement* take place.
2. Building *trust* among HEIs is found to be an important element. A positive climate, transparency of decision-making and structures as well as respect for diversity is highlighted.

3. Quality and quality assurance is constructed as *fitness-for-purpose* in terms of the learning environment, the content of programmes, learning opportunities, resources and facilities. It is also strategic, jointly developed, and compliance-driven. It demonstrates the achievement of objectives and outcomes (curriculum, teaching, admissions, mobility, financial management, etc.), administrative and/or legal compliance to rules and regulations (e.g., EM regulations, national study programme and HE regulations), content level and qualification correspondence to domestic and European qualifications framework.
4. JP programmes demonstrate *value-added* elements and in the Erasmus Mundus case, the enactment of its programme vision (esp. innovation).
5. A smoothly functioning programme demonstrates *effectiveness and efficiency*, whereas a successful EM programme also demonstrates *excellence* (e.g., an integrated and coherent curriculum; qualified and competent staff; effective leadership; division of labour; allocation of finance; communication and information sharing among partner institutions; active students with appropriate qualifications; mobile students and staff; and successful alumni).
6. *Internal and external assessment, evaluation and validation* is based on data and stakeholder feedback and is aimed at identifying weaknesses and strengths and generating recommendations for follow-up.
7. There is a strong emphasis on the *enhancement* activities which are follow-up actions targeted at the improvement of the elements listed above (in 3-5) by eliminating weaknesses, adjusting curricula and optimising processes.
8. *Quality practice* is viewed as a holistic and continuous process covering all aspects and activities of a programme (academic and administrative including student support) and its cycles such as development/design, implementation, monitoring, and improvement.

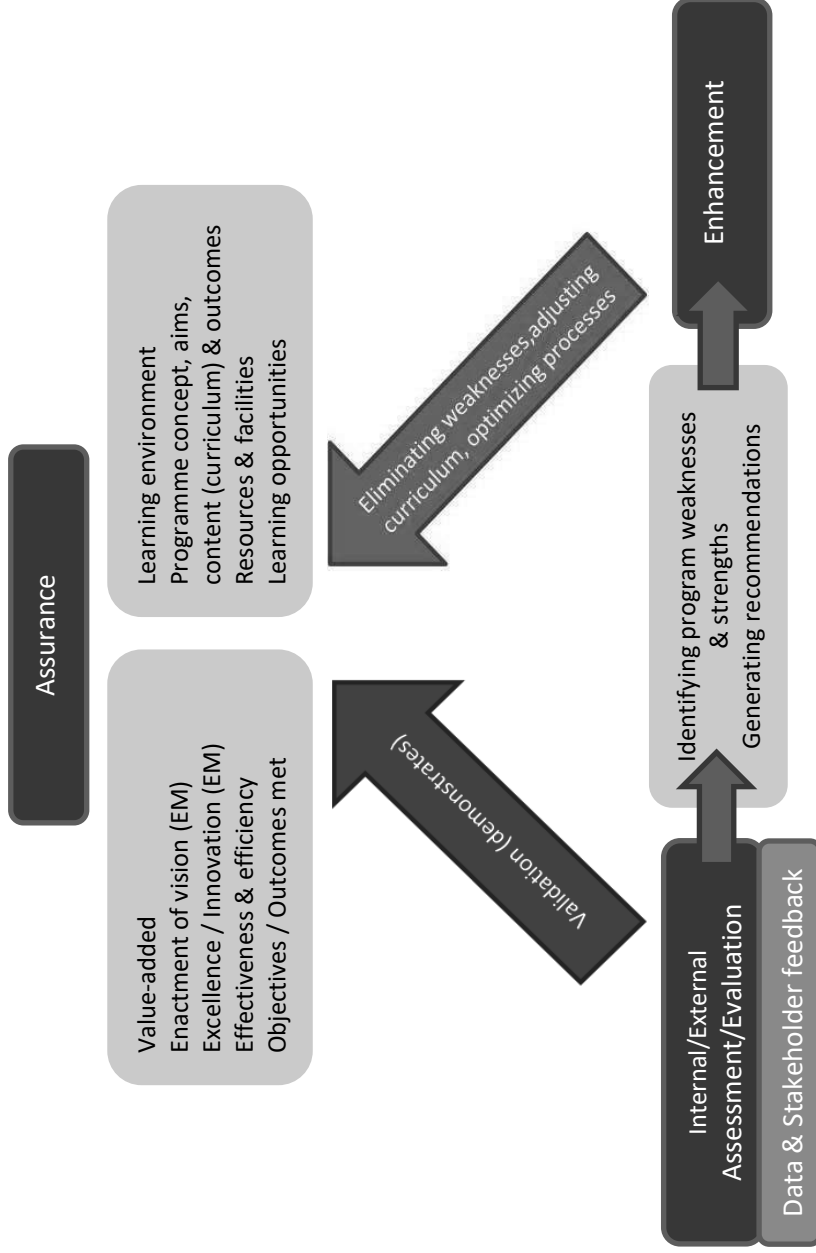
All of these elements reinforce each other in the development of inter-organizational quality culture and the quality practice of JPs. For instance, quality assurance is driven by quality enhancement activities which, in combination with assessment and evaluation practices, address programme weaknesses in general terms, optimize processes and adjust curricula, so that various programme elements such as learning environment, programme content, resources and other are fit-for-purpose. These eight dimensions and underlying aspects promote a certain conception of JP quality, particular principles, values and standards for the enactment of quality and cultivation of it; hence the institutionalized JP quality

practice. The Table V-10 and the Figure 2 provides a summary and a visual representation of this emerging practice.

**Table V-10. Joint programme quality practice**

DIMENSIONS		PRINCIPLES	ASPECTS	Holistic and continuous process covering all aspects and activities of programme (academic and administrative including student support) and its cycles (development/design, implementation, monitoring, improvement)
Institutional autonomy and responsibility (integrated responsibility of consortium and each individual partner institution)	Inter-institutional Quality Culture	Shared understanding	Academic cultures of PIs Quality Programme concept, aims, outcomes, strengths and weaknesses	
		Commitment to quality	Academic community members: staff, students, alumni	
		Stakeholder involvement	Leadership (institutional and JP)	
		Trust building	A positive climate Transparency (decision-making, structures, content & teaching) Respect for diversity	
	Quality-driven activities including internal / external assessment / evaluation and enhancement  -strategic -jointly developed -management driven	Fitness-for-purpose	Learning environment and opportunities Programme content; Resources and facilities	
		Excellence (Erasmus Mundus)	Integrated and coherent curriculum Qualified and competent staff Effective leadership Division of labour and finance Communication and information sharing among PIs Active students holding appropriate qualifications Mobile students and staff Successful alumni	

**Figure 2. Joint programme quality practice as *fitness-for-purpose***



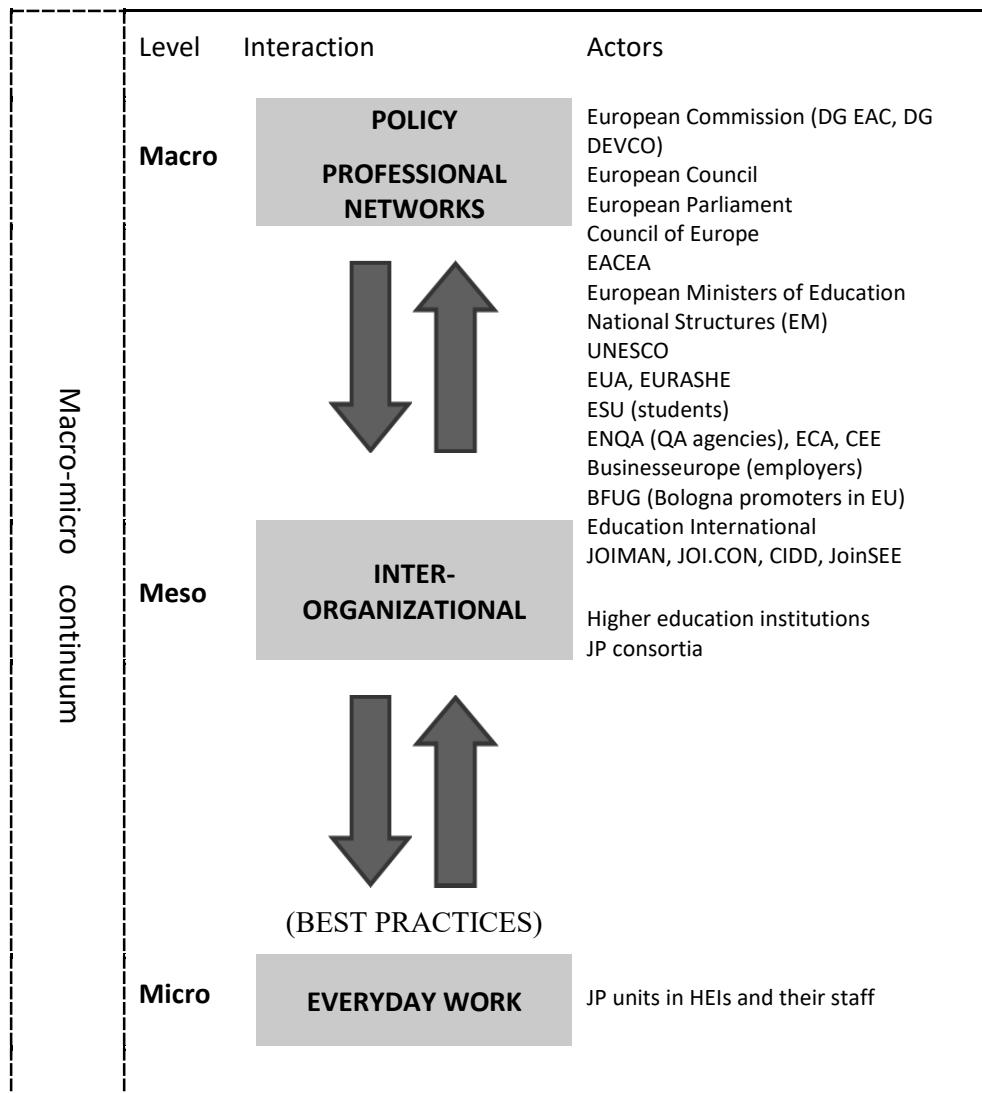
## SUMMARY & DISCUSSION

The emergence of JPs in the EHEA, their characteristics, quality matters and practices are embedded in a multi-level, multi-purpose and multi-actor environment. In this chapter I traced and analysed developments primarily taking place at a macro-level that contributed to the formation of JPs, co-creation and maintenance of their quality practice. The boundaries of different levels (macro, meso, micro) in this study are not always clear-cut due to the involvement of players not only at the European and national settings, but also the intergovernmental/international/inter-organizational setting. When analysing the role, activities and interaction of the multiple players in the institutionalization of JPs and their quality practice, the following distinctions are made. 1) EU institutions such as the European Commission, European Council, Council of Europe, European Parliament, UNESCO, and national Ministers of education are treated as organizations (actors) operating at a macro-level. 2) organizations representing HEIs such as the EUA, EURASHE, European student union (ESU), employers (BusinessEurope), QA agencies (ENQA, ECA, EQAR), Bologna promoters in EU countries (BFUG), JP networks and associations, Education International are observed to act as intermediary organizations instrumental not only in supporting and shaping European and national policies and developments regarding the JPs at a macro-level but also in the implementation of collaborative programmes in HEIs at meso and micro levels. Table V-11 illustrates the multiple actors that were involved in the institutional work of creating and maintaining JP practice in the EHEA. Findings from the case study illustrating the involvement of actors at HEIs and JP consortium (meso-level) and JP units and their staff (micro-level) are presented in the following chapter.

In Chapter 5, I argued that JPs were promoted and supported in policy work. I found that at a macro-level the EU political agenda and processes addressing the areas of education, economics, employability, and international development spurred JP developments. European level HE developments, especially Bologna driven processes and the strategic political agenda of such European institutions as European Commission, European Council laid ground for the establishment of JPs and necessary legal provisions for the programmes of collaborative nature. In theoretical terms this represents the regulatory element in the work of creating the institutionalized JP practice. EU institutions promoted and supported JPs through the policy work (HE reform, policies, strategies, and instruments), engaging as members in international and inter-organizational working groups, and monitoring activities of reform implementation.



**Table V-11. Multi-level processes and multi-actor involvement in the institutional work of joint programmes and their quality practice**



EU institutions became more involved with HE issues through the direct engagement in Bologna follow-up actions, e.g. the European Commission became a member of BFUG, it became also involved in monitoring of Bologna Process through country reports or so-called stocktaking exercises. Commission promoted

JPs, both at the Master's and Doctoral level through the launch and extension of Erasmus Mundus programme.

As it was argued in this chapter, JPs in general, and EMs in particular, were to serve as instruments contributing to the enhancement of higher education in the EHEA. Therefore, both European and national institutions had vested interests in the development of quality related guidelines and processes which would reinforce QA developments and European cooperation in such matters as promoted in Bologna Process (action line 5, see section 5.1). The European Commission was behind a number of those activities, whereas European funds were used to support the establishment of some professional networks and their projects related to the quality of HE provisions. Inter-organizational collaboration and consultation with key HE stakeholders was used as a vehicle to mobilize the political agenda, construct a JP identity and its quality practice.

Policy work represents one type of activity in the institutional work of JP practice development. As a result of political engagement with JPs at a European and at national levels, a vision and profile of JPs in the EHEA was created, their role and purposes defined and main elements including quality approach was outlined. EM was launched as a role model for JPs. Creating JPs and their quality practice at a macro-level exhibits all three processes of institutionalization described by Scott (2008b). *Regulatory* pressures in the form of agreements and recommendations were made for the groundwork in a legal basis of JPs at a European, and, consequently national levels. *Normative* orientations were prescribed by assigning a status of high-profile programmes and in the case of EM, a status of excellence. Certain aspects such as innovation and the element of value-added were introduced and promoted, and standards and approach for quality assurance adopted. Various elements of JPs and the implementation processes of these high quality programmes were grounded in best practices of JP providers (HEIs), their *cultural-cognitive* framework of organizing.

Another stream of activities leading to the creation of JP practice was pursued via inter-organizational cooperation in the form of constructing professional networks and associations which developed JP guidelines, standards, and provided training to HEIs. The latter was to a large extent based on the best practices of JP providers emanating from inter-organizational arrangements at the meso-level and everyday work at the micro-level (see next Chapter). The agency of inter-organizational, intermediary organizations such as EUA, EURASHE, ENQA, ECA, JOIMAN and their work undertaken in the form of guidelines, standards and approaches outlined

JP praxis which was guided by policy work; informed, and reinforced ongoing policy developments as well as served as best practice among HEIs. Consequently, particular standards and approaches to JP quality practice produced in manuals and guidelines were promoted in the EHEA. Policy making institutions incorporated some quality-related work of professional networks and associations in their policy recommendations. The quality approach and standards outlined in the ESG and EAQAJP were adopted in Bologna ministerial meetings.

These two streams of activities, the policy work and the formation of networks and development of guidelines taking place at a macro-level were instrumental in the institutional work of creating and maintaining JPs and their quality practice. A recursive interaction took place between these activities:

- a. policy work guided and framed JP practice through regulatory pressures;
- b. the formation of professional networks and associations, the development of JP guidelines, and standards supported policy goals, informed policy developments as well as reinforced and guided the development of JP practice in HEIs.

A recursive interaction is observed not only between the agency of policy forming institutions, newly constructed networks, associations and the creation of JP practice, but also between the activities undertaken by these actors.

Since much of the expertise provided by intermediary organizations to policy makers and HEIs was informed by everyday practices of HEIs, the next chapter explores how HEIs and their JP staff were co-creating and maintaining JP practice at meso-micro levels.

## VI. QUALITY IN THE *SOLO* CASE: INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND EVERYDAY WORK (MESO-MICRO)

In this study of JPs and their quality from the IW perspective, I take one more step to analyse a recursive relationship between organizational actors' agency and the emerging JP discourse and practice (institution). In this chapter, I zoom in to empirically analyse quality-related developments and practices at the (inter)organizational (meso) and individual (micro) level in the selected JP programme SOLO<sup>12</sup>. The chapter is divided into three main sections. A brief SOLO background and description is followed by an overview of consortium development and profile of partner institutions in section 6.1 in order to situate this JP in its context. The section also includes a study of JP quality elements at the meso-level (consortium and partner institutions). Consortium goals of the collaboration as well as the motives of individual partner institutions are studied in order to discern whether quality and its enhancement is an important part of JP inter-organizational arrangements, how quality is articulated in organizational goals, formal quality related strategies, and carried out through programme management, roles and responsibilities of the core group of the JP staff. In the next section (6.2), I identify the elements of institutional complexity in which the JP operates, contestations arising from such environment for a quality JP as well as discuss their implications for SOLO activities. The SOLO approach and the ways organizational actors are choosing to address the contestation are analysed. In the third section (6.3), I analyse and present everyday actions and interactions of JP staff, their understanding and interpretations of quality and its indicators, enactment of particular practices and what, according to them, contributes to the enhancement of quality. The chapter concludes with analytical insights in how field-level quality-related developments, an emergent discourse on quality assurance, the conception of quality as fitness-for-purpose, normative orientations emerging from policy work and 'best practices' presented in Chapter V, are played out in inter-organizational arrangements, everyday actions and interactions of JP staff, how they are (co-)created, maintained and/or neglected in SOLO.

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<sup>12</sup> This is a fictitious title. No true names of the selected case partner institutions and staff members are disclosed in the study.

## **SOLO case background and description**

SOLO is one of the Erasmus Mundus courses, a second-cycle (Master's level) joint study programme currently provided by a global network of HEIs. The SOLO programme has been granted the EM label since the early years of EM programme existence and was continuously approved by the EU EM for further funding. As noted by an administrative coordinator, "this particular programme has been held as best practice by the EU to other people trying to set up something similar" (University E, interview, 23 January, 2017). Moreover, SOLO as EMJP has gone through multiple evaluations and reviews by the EACEA. Initially it was done for selection and approval of EM status and funding, and later in the re-application process for further funding. Granting a continued status of EM by its European structures indicates that SOLO is recognized as meeting programme standards of excellence. The programme provides sufficient proof to the EM stakeholders such as EU units for the adherence to the main principles of these 'high' quality programmes (see section 5.1.1) promoted at a macro-level by policy makers and other HE stakeholders. Via its implementation SOLO is co-creating and carrying over particular EM and JP elements and practices presented in section 5.4. As one of the early EM programmes, SOLO figured in EM publications as an example of 'best practice' on how quality is 'safeguarded'. SOLO staff shared quality-related developments, strategies and practices with other JP providers and so by default were engaged in the institutional work of JPs, the co-creation of their quality approach. In 2008, a national organisation supporting internationalization efforts of universities awarded SOLO a 'quality label' as one of the TOP 10 International Master's degree courses in the country of the coordinating institution. This award is given to an international Master's degree programmes for its innovative concept, high-quality teaching, high degree of internationalization, comprehensive quality assurance mechanisms, excellent support service as well as convincing alumni results. These elements are the indicators and criteria of JP quality as judged by a national level agency.

### **6.1. Meso-level: consortium and inter-organizational arrangements**

I now move on to study the (inter-)organizational arrangements to design, implement, and enhance the SOLO programme. The consortium for an interdisciplinary, research-based Master's level course was established in 2005 following a call for application for EM programmes by the European Commission. Since the inception of the consortium in 2005 with four founding European HEIs, it

has grown to a network of twelve HEIs members from five continents: six European universities (five full members and one associate) and six non-European institutions (associate members). The consortium collaborates with other associated partners such as non-university-based centres, institutes and international platforms. The first student cohort completed the programme in 2007. That same year the Consortium extended the partnership base to four additional non-European universities and broadened a student exchange base for European students who could study for one term at one of those universities.

From 2005 to 2009 the JP activities were taking place under the agreement of four European universities. In 2010, European funding was extended for five more years. Three more institutions joined the Consortium: a European full partner institution and an associate non-European university member. This expansion implied an even broader geographical area and academic scope. In 2015 the consortium accepted one more European university as an associate partner. The Table VI-1 shows the expansion and composition of the consortium.

**Table VI-1. Expansion and composition of SOLO consortium**

Year	Full Members	Associate Members
2005	European University (A)* <sup>13</sup>	
	European University (B)*	
	European University (C)*	
	European University (E)*	
2007		Non-European University
		Non-European University
		Non-European University
		Non-European University
2010	European University (D)	Non-European University
		Non-European University
2015		European University

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<sup>13</sup> \* Founding members of the consortium

Five European universities (further A, B, C, D, E)<sup>14</sup> which are full members of the Consortium are directly responsible for the implementation and execution of the SOLO programme. The fieldwork for this study was carried out at these European full partner institutions. In the subsection below I provide an overview of these main partners in the consortium.

### *6.1.1. Partner institutions*

SOLO prime partners are European universities which range from institutions with a very long history from over 600 years to only under 50 years, from a student population of nearly 100,000 students to an institution with around 10,000, from very international (70% of the student body is international) to more local and regional (30% and around 2% of the student body is international), from comprehensive research universities to more specialized ones. Two of five full partner universities ranked in the top ten of the 2017 League Table of the top 200 Universities in Europe (UniRank).

*University A* is a comprehensive university, one of the largest and oldest universities in the German-speaking countries. At the time of the SOLO course proposal, University A had already been offering studies in the same field. The existing studies were re-designed and adjusted in order to fit the SOLO programme and the Bologna structure of a Master's level programme. It was the same year (2004) when the national higher education system was transitioning to a Bologna degree structure. University A continued to offer two tracks of the programme: a local one and SOLO. In the local version of the programme students may choose to study a semester abroad, but are not required to do so. In order to enrol in SOLO, students apply to the consortium and are selected through it. All students study in at least two, sometimes three universities. Some students receive scholarships. Staff from various university departments cooperate in this EM programme. Courses in SOLO are also open to local and exchange students from other departments.

*University B* is a lead institution and one of the SOLO founding members with the main coordinating functions of the consortium. It is a comprehensive university, one of the oldest higher education establishments in the consortium. A wide range of academic disciplines are offered at multiple faculties which increasingly pay attention to interdisciplinary cooperation among each other in both teaching and

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<sup>14</sup> The same letter codes are used throughout the study to refer to the countries in which universities are located.

research. The SOLO programme is currently housed at one of the university Institutes which is integrated into a larger structure of faculty. The institute grew out of a university centre which was devoted to the graduate teaching and research. The activities of the unit are also international by nature featuring the involvement of ‘cross-faculty’. Faculty members from other university research centres were drawn to teach in the SOLO programme.

*University C* is a large, well-established HEI boasting a history of more than three centuries. It is a comprehensive university structured in ten faculties. It focuses on research and prides itself for a large number of graduates, especially those who make the university famous by life- achievements such as Nobel prize winners. Initially the SOLO programme was based at one of the university centres, but after a few years the decision was made to move it to another department, a larger organizational unit. Currently it is part of the largest faculties of the university, which, according to respondents, by national HE authorities (the Ministry of Higher Education) is considered to be among the best in the country. SOLO students were taking courses at the department prior to the re-location. The department had a larger teaching staff body and more course offerings than the centre where the programme initially started, and content wise, according to respondents, was seen as a better fit for SOLO. When the decision was made to move the programme, the department was already running its first English taught Master’s level programme in a related academic field. With some additional new courses, it was relatively easy to pick up and run the EM programme. Students from both programmes are taking some of the same courses, so there was an efficiency element in the decision-making to re-locate the programme. The cooperation between the centre and the department continued but in a limited way.

*University E* is a specialized research-intensive, highly international, highly reputable and prestigious institution of higher learning worldwide, established at the end of the 19th century. It is the only PI located outside continental Europe. The university is organized in departments, institutes and research centres with over 10,000 student enrolment. The university takes pride in its highly ranked research activities, staff achievements, Nobel prize winners, and renowned world leaders who have studied and worked at the institution. SOLO students take one-year courses which are part of one of the Master’s of Science degree programmes offered by the university. It is a school policy to offer one-year postgraduate studies. The academic and social environment of the university differs from other PIs due to its very international staff and student body. English is the lingua franca



and SOLO students are fully integrated into the regular academic and social life of the university.

*University D* was the last European full PI to join the consortium in 2010. It is a comparatively young HEI with under 10,000 students, 10% of which are international. It is a campus university located in the outskirts of a city. Even from a very short visit, it was apparent that student teamwork in general (not specifically for SOLO) is encouraged and practiced at the university. Collaborative student work in both smaller and larger groups was observed at the university premises. The university offers degree programmes of an interdisciplinary nature which are focused on academic research and problem-oriented project work. Students actively engage in their learning, guided by teachers, they choose research topics and problems (GFS, p. 5). Such an approach to teaching and learning was rather innovative in the early years of university life setting it apart from older and more traditional national universities. Currently academic activities of the university are organized in six departments. SOLO is housed at one of the largest departments of the university. The cooperation of this university with SOLO has started when it was in the midst of developing its local Master's level degree programme in the same field of studies. University representatives participated in the discussions of the SOLO partner schools, in particular, drawing on the expertise in the field of studies from the coordinating institution. A director of studies who had been hired for a newly developed degree programme came from University B. Once the programme had been started and accredited nationally, the discussions started with the consortium about the possibility of joining it and becoming one of SOLO's PIs. Currently a so-called local version and SOLO programme are run in parallel. SOLO students are enrolled in the coursework with students from a local programme.

PIs vary in size, history, profile and academic status in the EHEA. Naturally, the country/national language is the primary working language at universities. The SOLO programme is embedded in the existing organizational structures and units, academic traditions and cultures. English, however, is the language used in SOLO. In the subsequent sections of the chapter, I will explore in more depth variations of academic cultures, traditions and practices of PIs and the implications of organizational and academic differences for the collaborative work of SOLO and its practice of quality.

### *6.1.2. Motivations for cooperation*

In this subsection, I explore the motivations and objectives of partner institutions to engage in joint activities in order to discern whether a concern for quality promoted in EM programme by policy makers was deemed to be important at the organizational (meso) level. The IW theoretical framework suggests that these organizational actions would be driven by particular actors' interests, goals, and motivations. By studying inter-organizational actions and the intentionality of organizational actors in setting up the project and developing quality related strategies and activities, we can see how the JP quality practice is created, maintained and/or disrupted. The data comes from the fieldwork, interviews with JP staff and official internal consortium documentation as indicated in section 4.3.

The consortium lead institution (University B) was instrumental in setting up the SOLO programme, securing partnerships, and filing the initial application with the EU. University B academic staff had good relations and knew their peers at each prospective PI prior to the call of the EM application. Prior to the establishment of the programme, the lead institution already had a large international network and was offering international doctoral training. As one of the academic staff members noted, there was an awareness of the "gains to bring the people from different places and to educate them" (University B, interview, 21 October, 2015). It was in the university's interests to further internationalize and expand international activities, overcome disciplinary divides by bridging different disciplines, and building a platform for cooperation among disciplinary units of the university. The SOLO programme development was driven on the one hand by university strategic aspirations to consolidate, restructure, and expand certain organizational units in order to promote and develop interdisciplinarity. On the other hand, the staff of the research centre where the SOLO programme started was willing to experiment, innovate, and collaborate with other disciplinary units of the university. Researchers were willing to engage in teaching activities and develop educational offers. As the director of the unit noted: "it was meant as sort of a laboratory for developing interdisciplinary research, and also teaching" (Consortium head, University B, interview, 27 October, 2015). The leader of the project and a current head of the consortium reminisces, Erasmus Mundus seemed to be "a proper instrument to do exactly" (*ibid.*) what was intended, but there were neither structures nor resources available at the university. "EM gave an opportunity to create a completely new field" (*ibid.*) of studies which was just emerging in the US but was not well established in Europe. Connecting with other universities, creating

synergies, filling in gaps and building on the existing strengths of the university seemed a natural next step, whereas the funding provided by the EU and the introduction of fees, which was not a part of a national academic culture, made cooperation sustainable (ibid.).

At University A, similarly to University B, SOLO project was both a bottom-up and top-down development. SOLO started as an initiative from academic staff but it was in the interest of the rectorate too. Relationships among academics from these universities have already existed prior to the proposal. When University B staff approached their peers at University A with the idea of starting a JP, it was welcomed and supported by University A authorities. Academic staff reviewed the proposal and ‘pushed for it’. As professors who were primary initiators of the JP shared during interviews, besides the internal formalized university procedures for approving new study programmes, it was very important to secure the support of the leadership at the department, faculty, and the institution. One professor, who was instrumental in the design of the SOLO programme and set up of procedures, indicated that interest and support especially from the rectorate was very important. For the vice-rector it was viewed as “the deal of raising standards at the university, having Erasmus Mundus programmes is very high prestige also in the international evaluations” (interview, 2 June, 2016).

One of the motivating factors to start the SOLO programme at the University C was an interest in further internationalization both of the teaching process and of the student body. Similar to the situation in country A, EM programmes are considered to be prestigious in the domestic (country C) higher education arena. For University C to get involved in the SOLO programme, according to the coordinator meant ‘upgrading’ (interview, 25 January, 2016) university’s rank in its national system. The experience of teachers acquired through exchange, opportunities for further cooperation, the enrichment brought by students’ knowledge, perspectives and experience were equally important. The last, but not the least was the fact that the department could generate some income by charging tuition fees. Tuition fees for foreign students is an established practice in country C.

For University E, the collaboration in JP activities had its own twist of organizational, to be more specific departmental motivation and bottom-up development. As the consortium head recalls, academic staff of University E saw the opportunity “at the occasion of EM” (University B, interview, 27 October, 2015) to transform the department which got engaged in the cooperation, to shape the curriculum and to hire new faculty.

University D joined the consortium in 2010. Since 2008, university staff have been proactive in joining a circle of institutions offering studies in the academic field of SOLO project. The university was setting up a local study programme in the field (of SOLO) and this was a pass to get into the global association of institutions offering similar studies. Personal relationship of the department chair with University B was important as it was one of the universities which in addition to the SOLO consortium also initiated the founding of the global association linking universities that offer studies in the same field of study (as SOLO). According to the SOLO programme coordinator at University D, when they were designing their local programme in the emerging field of studies it was of primary importance to share experiences, engage in dialogue and participate in knowledge transfer with like-minded institutions. For University B, on the other hand, it was important to contribute to the development of similar programmes, and growth of the field in Europe. The consortium extended the invitation to University D to join as an equal SOLO partner. In 2010, the department through the consortium gained access to an expanded circle of institutions for student and faculty mobility to and from consortium member institutions, both full European partners and associate members globally. According to respondents this also helped the department to avoid unnecessary bureaucratic procedures and at times not necessarily easy pathway of setting up exchange agreements through central structures of the university.

### **Formalizing partnership via cooperation agreement**

As discussed in previous sections, these bottom-up and top-down driven motives to collaborate were formalized via a cooperation agreement. Currently SOLO activities are guided by the “Partnership and Cooperation” agreement signed in March 2010 by the representatives of five European universities: rectors (Universities B and D), a vice-rector responsible for programme development and internationalization (University A), a vice rector for teaching affairs (University C) as well as a pro-director for research and external relations (University E). The agreement authorization by university leaders shows the strategic importance of the project as well as the need to secure the support of university management.

In the preamble of the agreement, acknowledgement is made to added value of collaborative work and earlier consortium experience in the period 2005-2009. The consortium seeks “the advantage of joining forces in the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge” (CA, 2010, p. 2), foresees “the usefulness of sharing

their experiences and strengths as innovative and entrepreneurial universities”, and takes “the chance of mutually enhancing the quality of teaching and research” (ibid). Universities acknowledge that the design of a “jointly confirmed and integrated programme [makes] best use of each partner’s strengths and competences in the field, strictly up to date in content and truly European in shape” (ibid). The agreement is set for eight years with the official review of the agreement twelve months before the end date. New members could join as full members, if voted unanimously by all five partner institutions. For a visual presentation of the European counterpart of the consortium, please see Figure 5 in the Appendices.

By signing the agreement, the leadership of PIs acknowledges a value-added element of the JP brought by the advantage of joining efforts, sharing experiences, and mobilizing strengths with the intention of enhancing the quality of teaching and research. Not surprisingly, the formal agreement demonstrates explicitly that the intentions of SOLO and its activities support the vision of EM programme, and are in line with JP values promoted by professional networks of JP providers. The official consortium agreement is rather explicit, stating that partner universities should take the opportunity of mutually enhancing the quality of teaching and research.

The data from interviews disclosed a more nuanced story about the motives for collaboration and how the cooperation is seen by JP staff. Sharing of expertise, cross-fertilization of ideas, and building on each other strengths was meant to feed innovations and development of the field of studies in Europe. It was also found that for some institutions ‘filling in gaps’, expanding course offerings in English, thus further internationalization, development of course offerings, teaching and research capacity building, and raising overall standards were also important. Consequently, innovations in the study field, expanded internationalization and enhanced interdisciplinary teaching and research are treated as value-added elements in this particular case. There were symbolic elements linked to the collaboration as well, e.g., prestige by participating in the EM programme, and its perceived value in the external assessment of institutions. As respondents were reporting, it became evident that university staff used an opportunity to achieve inward-oriented rational goals of institutions and in some instances leverage cooperation in order to re-structure departments, overcome internal organizational hurdles for expanding international partnerships, and make necessary changes to human resources and/or the curriculum.

In the initial stage of JP development, we see intrinsically motivated staff interested in the same idea, supported by a governance arrangement. Quality challenges do not surface explicitly. The impression emerges that partners aimed to improve both their local provision and to collectively arrive at an overarching EM. While not necessarily explicitly linked to the idea of quality, many of the objectives identified by respondents which are related to either teaching or research and the development of curriculum or structures, are improvement led. They fit within a current discourse on JP quality especially re-enforcing its underlying principles in EM programme objectives such as added value, effectiveness, efficiency, and innovation.

### *6.1.3. The programme, its governance and management structure*

The SOLO programme is a product of inter-organizational arrangements embedded in the structures of home institutions and their JP units. As described in the cooperation agreement, it is a research programme oriented and “closely linked to the research facilities” of five European partner schools. Contributions of non-European partners through student and scholar mobility as well as different perspectives and takes on the field of studies are seen by interviewees as programme enrichment. The programme is comprised of a total of 120 ECTS and shares a common concept or, as it is called, a general profile. University B aims “as a leading institution [to] provide portals into different [disciplinary] directions” (Academic, interview, 26 October, 2015) as a broad-based orientation. Each PI is focused on specific topics, unique curriculum and thematic specializations. Students have a choice in selecting the area of studies and engaging in depth at PIs; however, as JP staff note, the final placement decision rests with the admissions team.

The consortium is responsible for student selection. The lead institution pre-screens all applications. All PIs representative staff members participate in the process of a final student selection. The consortium offers Erasmus Mundus grants to some selected ‘highly qualified’ students. Selection criteria are explicit and publicly available. These include the applicant’s academic excellence (previous study results and ‘quality’ of the institution that awarded the first degree); language skills; motivation and academic potential; extra-curricular activities and/or work experience. Scholarships are offered by the EU Commission which sets the amount and which country nationals would be entitled to receive funding. Also, the consortium may offer university scholarships.

Based on student needs, the PIs profile, and specialization tracks, the consortium offers Year 1 and Year 2 study placements to students; thus SOLO students study at two different European universities (full partner institutions), as a rule, at each one for one academic year. In addition, they may opt for a semester at a third university, usually at a non-European university (associate member of the consortium). As noted by respondents, it does happen that not all student preferences may be accommodated which sometimes lead to application withdrawal by a prospective student. The consortium agreed that up to 120 students could be accepted into the programme with the provision to review this number, if necessary. Average student enrolment since 2009 is about 70 students.

The consortium also holds joint Winter and Summer Schools every year for all enrolled students. These schools offer workshops and lectures led by the teaching staff of all full PIs. Student groups from PIs come together to get to know their peers and to experience the transnational nature of the study programme.

According to the Cooperation agreement, the rector of the coordinating institution represents the consortium in all legal aspects (CA, 2010, p. 11). In practice SOLO is run by a consortium head (University B), a consortium coordinator (University B), an executive secretary (University C), and academic and administrative coordinators from all full PIs. JP staff in these positions form the core group of SOLO, having responsibilities described later in this section. They are members of a *Steering Committee* which is “a final decision-making body overall responsible for the implementation and the execution” (ibid., p. 4) of the programme. According to the agreement, the committee may serve as an arbitration body in case disputes arise. Most of these staff members were interviewed for this study as they are directly involved in the developments of the programme and are responsible for its overall quality.

The *consortium head* is an academic and manager. All major curricular developments and consortium partnerships were initiated by the head of the consortium. He is an active academic, teaching in the programme, liaising between consortium and local faculty as well as institutional authorities, when need arises, “translating [to them] cultural sensibilities” (Consortium head, interview, 27 October, 2015) of working in a collaborative project with institutions from various continents. The head of the consortium is directly involved in dialogues with consortium members about further developments in the Steering Committee meetings, at Winter/Summer Schools, as well as other academic events organized by the consortium such as forums and conferences.

The day-to-day programme management and coordination is carried out by the *consortium coordinator*, a staff member of the coordinating institution, and local *coordinators* from all PIs. While in the EM framework the main coordinator is the head of the programme also responsible for academic matters, in this particular JP the consortium coordinator is an administrative staff member. She directly communicates with all PIs and is responsible for coordination and information sharing among them, public information (e.g., a website), student selection and the admission process coordination, documentation, student support services (from the first contact with all admitted students until they graduate), the organization of main SOLO events such as Summer and Winter Schools, graduation, student feedback and programme evaluation activities, and reporting to the EU. The consortium coordinator also serves as the local co-coordinator of the JP.

Local coordinators are responsible for the implementation and execution of SOLO at their home institutions (CA, 2010, p. 12). They are in close contact with each other and serve as liaisons between the Consortium and their home university (faculty, students, other university units), as well as mediators between faculty and students. Local coordinators are authorised “to discuss, negotiate and agree [on] decisions or provide recommendations” (ibid., p. 3) for SOLO developments. Academic coordinators (also called Study directors or Program directors at respective institutions) are involved in the review of student application, teaching activities, thesis supervision, curriculum related questions and discussions regarding programme planning, changes and improvements, and alignment to institutional and/or national study programme requirements. They are involved in course reviews, to varying degrees, student evaluation and feedback reviews and reporting to the EU. Administrative coordinators organize and administer student support services related to admissions, documentation, course selection, alumni network, and general problem-shooting. Due to the specificity of the inter-institutional and the transnational nature of the programme with a diverse student body, so called ‘special services’ are provided to students such as orientation, social and cultural activities, assistance with regard to visa and residence permits, registration at the city, housing, medical insurance contracts, help with bank accounts.

This core group of JP staff came up with such organizational and structural arrangements, the roles and responsibilities as they saw fit with the nature of the joint project. There was a requirement on behalf of the consortium that each PI would have a local coordinator who would devote time specifically for the SOLO



project and be an active member of the Steering Committee involved in planning and developing JP activities, monitoring JP quality via formalized quality reviews as described in the following section. Universities A, B and C have administrative staff (coordinators) working only for SOLO, whereas the positions of such staff at universities D and E include other responsibilities beyond JP matters.

*6.1.4. Formal quality related developments: consortium strategy, structures and activities*

At the start of SOLO, by signing a cooperation agreement all PIs formally agreed to ‘safeguard’ quality of the JP for the elements offered by a respective institution, i.e. to “cooperate in activities to maintain the quality of the *Standard Curriculum*” (CA, p. 13) as well as “fulfil the necessary formal requirements for accreditation... in their home country” (ibid.).

In the cooperation documents, there is a presupposition that the JP must be of high quality, especially due to its brand, the acknowledgment and the external validation by the EU achieved via the selection process to secure funding for the programme. Thus, in the official documents quality-related developments are treated as activities which contribute to quality assurance. According to the written policies of the consortium during the first cycle of the programme (2005-2010), the consortium established a so-called four-tier quality assurance mechanism which included the following activities:

1. Students’ annual evaluation of their stay at one of the EU universities
2. Lecturers’ reports of the mobility stay
3. Annual institutional reports on student performance
4. Institutional evaluation reports on incoming teacher mobility (QAM, p. 1).

All four types of reports were then subject to discussion at the annual meetings of the consortium. “In addition to this institutionalized structure of quality assurance management” (ibid.) the consortium saw the following activities contributing to quality assurance:

- A. Organisational: working meetings among partner institutions
- B. Formal evaluation procedures: student and faculty course evaluations practiced by partner institutions (internal); accreditation (external)
- C. Teaching and research: joint teaching and research activities with non EU universities; joint efforts to establish PhD programmes
- D. Mobility for students and teachers.

## **Communication channels**

In addition to the organisational arrangements (A above), the consortium created various communication channels which are found to be important for the execution and developments of a viable programme. Communication within the consortium among PIs is carried out either directly in person between SOLO programme staff at various meetings, and academic and social events or using ICT technologies. Steering committee members are two-way communicators between consortium and home institutions. They serve as internal communication mediators at home institutions by sharing consortium news and providing feedback to JP units from joint venues. Likewise, they communicate about developments at the local institutions to the consortium. Academic coordinators liaise with home university structures regarding programme and curricular matters. Administrative staff work with centralized university units to assure the services to EM students are provided in a timely and efficient manner.

Internal communication at the local institutions is found to be equally important for the overall viability of the programme as interaction among PIs. Communication forms and intensity within PIs vary. For instance, at University A the communication between programme administration and academic staff was noted to be informal, different than in general at the faculty level. At University B, administrators and academics also engage in a lot of informal communication in addition to the institutionalized forms of departmental colloquia regarding curriculum, research, and quality-related aspects. At universities C and D, however, a lack of depth internal communication was brought up.

Publicly available information about the programme primarily is hosted in a comprehensive and centralized programme website of the coordinating institution. It serves various groups, both internal and external audiences. Parts of the publicly available information were requested by the EM requirements. Information is posted to prospective and current students, staff and other stakeholders. Some JP departments use available structures of internal communication, e.g., university IT platforms for posting courses, processing grades, course evaluations, etc., whereas, University C developed an online platform specifically for EM students.

PIs also decide on other forms of communication and feedback mechanisms with students. Some PIs prefer more formal and organized forms of communication through student representatives in the programme, student liaison committees

and/or student unions. Other institutions prefer direct and informal communication with all students, or a combination of informal and formal communication channels (see also details on student feedback below).

Reporting to the EU is a main form of and part of the evaluation strategy as outlined in the following paragraph. The consortium coordinator is the primary report writer, collecting input from PIs. The consortium is aware of both monitoring the implementation of the programme and elements of accountability through the established reporting functions. At the same time PIs use the reporting to the EU EM unit as an opportunity for further dialogue among each other and the building of shared understandings (see also section 6.3.3).

### **Evaluation instruments and activities**

By the end of the first programme cycle, the consortium claimed that it had a more comprehensive SOLO programme evaluation strategy. The documentation provided to the EU as part of the re-application process outlined various evaluation processes regarding the success of SOLO. Twice a year during Winter and Summer Schools when the Steering Committee would hold its bi-annual meetings, the following would be on the agenda:

1. A review of the student application and admission process
2. A review of course content and fit with the overall JP objectives
3. Assessment of academic and non-academic mentoring
4. Description and evaluation of audit results
5. Evaluation of an induction programme, Summer/Winter Schools (joint activities of JP)
6. Reports to the EU.

The consortium planned the following students' evaluation activities:

1. Course surveys specifically developed for the programme (at the end of each semester)
2. Semester evaluation including the teaching, curriculum and programme management
3. Student survey results discussed with teachers and module coordinators
4. Student semester evaluations discussed with students
5. Meetings with student representatives to discuss the implications of their evaluation results.

The consortium created and/or integrated parallel quality-related structures and mechanisms: internal (PI), joint (consortium), externally driven (accreditation and EM reporting). According to an academic and administrator at University C, “every university has its own different model of quality, teaching quality assurance” (interview, 26 January, 2016). New forms of quality assurance in the SOLO project expanded quality-driven activities at PIs. Centralized institutional procedures were supplemented with SOLO quality instruments and in some instances vice versa. For instance, JP units at two universities (B and C) were ahead of centralized university developments in the evaluation practices. They looked for samples of surveys at other institutions and adapted these to SOLO needs. Later on student evaluation of teaching and coursework became a regular and centralized practice at all PIs.

Feedback is found to be the most prevalent form of QA practices. There are certain types of student feedback, e.g., course evaluations, sessions with students (also during Summer and Winter Schools) as well as feedback and reporting from PIs to EM structures. The study finds that all PIs conduct course evaluation surveys. Universities E and C also have centralized graduation and alumni surveys. Table VI-2 presents a summary of information provided by staff about the current evaluation practices that are taking place in SOLO.

As research in HE quality indicates, “student feedback on all aspects of their experience has become, for many commentators, a ‘cornerstone of quality assurance’” (Williams, 2012; Nair and Mertova, 2011). The consortium has definitely picked up on this institutionalized form of quality practices, developed and/or enhanced the approach that would work in their specific case. The research shows that in general the practice in SOLO consists of extensive feedback and evaluation processes in which students, lecturers and coordinators are involved. The feedback instruments focus on all stages of student engagement in SOLO, starting with the pre-arrival and application process, programme induction, to coursework, supervision and mentoring, the overall student experience during the study at a particular university, reflections at the time of graduation and as alumni. Student and alumni feedback is also requested by the EU. This QA practice supports explicit statements about the system of continuous quality assurance processes found on the SOLO webpage.

**Table VI-2. Evaluation of teaching – student feedback**

<b>Course evaluations Requirement</b>	<b>University A</b>	<b>University B</b>	<b>University C</b>	<b>University D</b>	<b>University E</b>	<b>Consortium</b>
<b>Frequency/Form</b>	centralized university	centralized university (started in JP unit)	centralized university, also national	centralized university	academic department	some sort of student feedback requested by EU institutional responsibility
<b>Goal</b>	every second year (online, anonymous)	each term (online)	each term (online)	each term (online, anonymous)	each term (paper, anonymous)	surveys at the end of the year
	Control Giving students voice Consumer orientation A safety wall against student riots Possible improvements	Monitoring Development Encouraging students to reflect, engaging them in further developments Teaching support	Meeting of minimal standards' Part of staff performance Assessment Open space to voice the opinion for students	Students voice to communicate constructive comments Improvement of the course /project	Regular student feedback for individual classes Used for faculty promotion and tenure	Student perception of overall improvements
<b>Follow-up/ interim steps</b>	Voicing students' experience, making suggestions to the programme Staff and student 'Study Conference' (discussion in core group, not public) Informal meetings regarding possible improvements	Staff and student 'Study Conference' Formal reviews organized at the faculty level Committee at the academic unit lots of informal interaction about content of courses		Mid-course diagnostic student reports for the faculty to make adjustments, if necessary, taken to study boards Head of studies may review student feedback, possible improvements discussed		Identification of problems and solutions  Informal suggestions to the programme by students
<b>Outcome/ Reflexivity</b>	Up to the instructor No consequences	Gives some idea and an overall picture Helpful only if it may link with specific teaching	Could help to improve if more seriously taken by university authorities Areas for improvement identified; May result in HR changes	Overall issues Not individual specific		

## Section summary

At the consortium (meso-level) formal inter-organizational arrangements were made by PIs regarding the programme, its infrastructure, main processes, and quality-driven activities. These include formal arrangements such as cooperation and membership agreement, setting of structures (e.g., curricular, managerial, student support), and processes (e.g., mobility, student selection and admissions, evaluation), and outlining and defining roles and responsibilities of core JP staff, SOLO QA strategy and its elements. These inter-organizational arrangements were set up by the SOLO programme ‘champions’ in each PI (most of them still hold key JP staff positions serving, e.g., as programme directors/coordinators) and endorsed by university authorities. SOLO programme leaders: consortium head, coordinator, academic and administrative coordinators were instrumental in the setup of SOLO arrangements including the framework for its quality practice. University leadership played a more formal role by endorsing the project, securing the support and strategically anchoring it within the university structures, whereas the SOLO leadership team, earlier referred to as the Steering Committee, formalized the arrangements and their content which are supposed to guide the collaborative work and everyday practices.

The formalized and explicit statements about JP quality in SOLO express these overarching goals: safeguarding and maintaining quality, and complying with and fulfilling external requirements, including accreditation. The quality of the programme and its value-added elements are constructed in terms of innovations in the study field, internationalization and interdisciplinary teaching and research. QA solutions are constructed around programme activities, processes and aspects that are found to be important (admissions, mobility, student performance, teaching, research, curriculum, mentoring, joint events, and auditing), whereas QA activities are centred on reviews, evaluation, reporting, and discussions among the main internal SOLO stakeholders, i.e., teachers, coordinators and students. The intentions of these activities are twofold. First, to provide the Consortium with sound data not only to evaluate the most important aspects of the study programme and its processes starting with admissions to supervision of thesis, organisational aspects, congruence of modules, etc., but also to identify action for improvement. Staff exchange, stakeholder meetings, joint teaching and research activities among consortium institutions are viewed as contributing to the overall quality of SOLO programme. The explicit public statement on the programme website describes a process-based approach to JP quality assurance as an ongoing or ‘continuous’

effort to engage in the evaluation of SOLO quality all major stakeholders (students, alumni, teaching and administrative personnel, external reviewers).

In the case of SOLO, JP quality practice is projected and designed by SOLO leadership team. The team exercised a projective-evaluative agency to initiate and formalize inter-organizational arrangements outlining intentions to cooperate with regard to quality, including strategies, mechanisms, instruments and the underlying principles of QA process. In SOLO quality arrangements, multiple aims and outcomes of quality-related work were defined. The practice calls for maintaining, safeguarding, monitoring, and enhancing quality as well as to a large extent complying with external requirements and regulations. The focus was on the value-added and innovative nature of JP; quality practice that encompasses various actions and activities in the areas of internal/external assessment, and evaluation, as well as stakeholder feedback elements are found to be in line with the emerging JP quality discourse and practice promoted at a macro-level (as outlined in section 5.4). This indicates that organizational actors are co-creating and reproducing JP quality assurance discourse and practice via inter-organizational arrangements, development of a particular approach to quality and its practices that are integrated into organizational structures, processes, and activities.

## **6.2. Institutional complexity in SOLO**

Institutional complexity (see Figure 1) defines the content and meaning of institutions (here – JPs and their quality practice). It oftentimes provides contradictory and ambiguous messages, but nonetheless shapes the behaviour of the actors involved. In this section, I turn my attention to the elements of institutional complexity in SOLO which frame programme developments, and the ways in which organizational actors deal with JP quality issues in such an environment.

It was observed that the multiplicity of stakeholders and actors, their roles and requirements were contributing to the institutional complexity of SOLO. Requirements of EM structures as well as variations in national legal frameworks regulating academic offers and their quality resulted in certain contestations around ‘jointness’, and arrangements for the degree type awarded. Academic cultures and practices of PIs were not homogeneous and had to be addressed in the SOLO project. In addition, partner institutions’ cooperation interests, organizational agendas, and power relations, as well as the level of commitment and motivations

of both PIs and JP staff were found to affect inter-organizational JP arrangements for safeguarding quality as well as carrying it out via everyday work.

### *6.2.1. Multiple 'levels of working'*

The consortium worked throughout the years to develop the programme profile and identity. As an administrative coordinator at University A pointed out, “the consortium and the programme itself is its own entity” (interview, 7 June, 2016). However, due to the transnational and inter-institutional nature of collaboration SOLO is tied and accountable not only to departmental and more central university authorities, but also to national HE systems of PIs and the EM structures. As noted by a teaching staff member “there are different levels of working” (University B, interview, 21 October, 2015) in the development of the courses and, consequently, the programme, also the implementation of it. How the programme is structured, designed, and implemented, and what kind of quality-related processes are in place depends on multiple stakeholders from various levels such as the EU and/or national HE structures, the consortium, and partner universities (their organizational commitments, goals and agendas towards joint activities and consortium quality strategies as reviewed in the previous sections). The multiplicity of actors including individual staff members is well-described by the consortium coordinator:

In general, for whatever procedures you have certain levels. So you have an individual person, who steers processes, for example, this evaluation of the infrastructure, it was something I initiated myself, because I felt it's kind of important so no one forced me to do it but since I took care of it I wanted to know if students are satisfied. Then you have a level of the individual university managed by certain faculty or even central administration, so from there come some requirements and ideas as well. Then you have the level of the consortium, where things are discussed as well as some parallel structures, does not go from bottom up, instructors. And then you have, in [University B] at least, you have a level of federal state which influences not our programme directly but the universities, of course, because they give certain requirements for the universities and then you have the national level and then you have the level of EU. And sometimes things conflict. (interview, 20 October, 2015)

As noted by the consortium coordinator and observed throughout the study, the commitment, interests, motivations, roles, and responsibilities of individual staff members engaged in the programme also play a key role in the developments of the programme and its quality practice. Please see Appendix H for a list of actors at



various levels that have been engaged in JP developments via their particular roles and actions.

The EU-level organizations overlooking EM projects have certainly played an important role in quality-related developments of JPs. An academic staff member confirms that both internal and external forms of “quality assurance measures were prescribed through the EU” (University B, interview, 21 October, 2015). The consortium coordinator is also very clear:

of course we have sent to the EU some kind of quality agenda. But again this is just some notes and it is not an entire compendium; this idea of this quality assurance, notes, agenda, or however you might call it basically came, if I remember correctly, from the EU... This was basically something the EU wanted from us, otherwise we might have started doing it later only, might have not done it at all ...and then, of course, the EU nevertheless forces to have in place evaluation or that evaluation takes place. That might not be very specific, and they might not have certain questionnaires, but they say you need to have this kind of structure. (University B, interview, 20 October, 2015)

The coordinator reflects that, on the one hand, the EU requirements for Erasmus Mundus JP QA measures pushed the consortium to have certain procedures in place, but, on the other hand, SOLO staff was genuinely interested in, e.g., creating some student feedback structures and instruments. SOLO staff became innovative at their home faculties and JP units with course evaluations (B), feedback sessions with students, and alumni surveys (C), and consortium evaluations of infrastructure. At those universities, experimentation with student feedback and course evaluation instruments was a novice practice which was started by JP staff. They developed and started survey practice specifically for SOLO activities. Years later universities implemented a centralized system transferring some of this experience and know-how, adopting the elements of the evaluation culture. An academic staff member makes a reference to how it was dealt with at the coordinating institution:

In [country B] there is not really a tradition of this quality management talk at universities. So there is always a big resistance against any kind of quality management, therefore these are only innovations and what we have done at the institute is already quite beyond what is going on. Therefore this is a bit of a specific situation. (University B, interview, 26 October, 2015)

The consortium coordinator also noted that over the years of EM programme implementation, more explicit regulations were developed by the EM unit of the EC for certain elements of programmes, a standard for transparency through public

means was reinforced. For instance, it was required of EM JPs to provide particular information on its website to make this information publicly accessible. The SOLO consortium followed the requirement by publishing various cooperation and programme-related elements.

As we see, SOLO staff followed the official demands of the EU EM structures to implement evaluation and feedback mechanisms, engaged themselves in creating a system which would serve the needs of the specificity of the EM case by covering various aspects of the programme. SOLO staff worked innovatively with QA tools, reporting about these developments to the EM structures and in this way engaged in the creation and dissemination of the best practices, not only at their home institutions, but also in the larger EMJP community.

At the same time there were elements of emerging JP quality practice among other JP providers that the SOLO consortium resisted to implement. For instance, SOLO staff claim to have a more organic approach to dealing with quality issues when they arise rather than spending a lot of time to prepare detailed descriptions of systems and procedures to be followed ‘by the book.’

While there are certainly top-down expectations and requirements for quality assurance coming down from macro-level players (here EM structures), initiatives and innovations with evaluation practices at meso-level, both the consortium and home institutions as well as everyday work of JP staff point to a recursive nature of institutional JP quality work. The developments of quality practices were reinforced among macro-meso-micro levels. Macro-level players promoted certain elements and values of evaluation culture (as was elaborated upon in section 5.4) which were incorporated by organizational actors at meso and micro levels (PIs and EMJP units).

### *6.2.2. Areas of contestation*

Varied stakeholder expectations and requirements arising from multiple levels of working, national regulations, and settings especially for study programmes, create points of tension and contestation for the provision of a quality programme and the overall (also shared) understanding of quality. They pose issues of accountability to and compliance with multiple requirements and regulations. One area of contestation found in the study of SOLO is around the key idea of ‘jointness’ and the related issues of a joint degree and integrated curriculum. Another area relates to the evaluation culture and observation of quality ‘by the book’.

The excellence of EM programme promoted by European institutions and supported in EMQA (see also Table V-8) is based on the highest degree of jointness among PIs. The promoted idea of jointness is threefold: the EM programme aims to award a joint degree, have joint processes and structures (such as admission of students, examination, various committees, and boards or similar) and a joint or integrated curriculum. In order to meet the expectations of the official EM structure and one of the key EM programme stakeholders, i.e. the EACEA, PIs explored opportunities to grant a joint degree. However, due to differences of the legal basis in the countries of PIs, and/or institutional policies and agendas, the consortium awards a combination of degrees. In 2010, a joint degree is awarded for students who spend a part of their studies at Universities A, B and C. In addition, University C also awards a degree according to its national legislation (see Table VI-3). According to the participants of the study, the national or federal HE education environment of the countries involved in the EM was, and remains to be, very diverse, from high national steering and regulation to greater autonomy granted to universities. Naturally, both national and supra-national legal environment affects the implementation of ‘jointness’. A University D academic notes that

a national compliance is a recurrent issue that a new law has been passed in [countries C and D]... and for some reason it has never been passed in [country A]... They just don't care, but in [countries C and D]... we would appear to be under more rigid regulation than in [country A]... at least. (interview, 5 November, 2015)

University A academic's perspective supports such statement. According to the respondent, since early 2000 the university

became an independent organization so there is no further regulations from the government side but there are regulations from the Bologna process and... the whole European process... what was very very difficult to achieve, was the joint degree. (interview, 2 June, 2016)

In country B, joint degree programmes are part of the HE internationalization agenda. In 2013, the national government adopted a strategy and joint policy goals for action in the area of HE internationalization. According to the national report regarding the Bologna Process implementation in 2012-2015, facilitation of JP accreditation was included as one of the policy actions to be undertaken. The SOLO programme has undergone its accreditation through a local accrediting body

of the coordinating institution. However, even the consortium coordinator is not convinced that awarding of joint degree is a necessity in their collaboration:

joint degree is discussable..., if this is something really necessary, but i would say a double degree is as fine as joint degree and all of the students prefer doing the double degree, because it pretends to them that they have two degrees which is actually not true, but for them, it makes it look like two degrees. So they are actually even in favour of the double degree, it is just the EU which stated quite clearly if you don't have a joint degree [in] place, in terms of content..., so it will be less favoured to become and stay Erasmus Mundus programme. That's why there is this double structure, otherwise we would say for practical reasons, okay if those two universities can't offer joint degree then we would offer double degree in a form for all students of the programme, but since EU forces us somehow to do so that's why there is this double structure. (interview, 20 October, 2015)

In 2009, political parties in country D have come to an agreement regarding the regulation and financing of EM programmes. However, as stated in a national report regarding the Bologna Process Implementation 2009-2012:

Some sections of laws and regulations... have hindered... universities to actively seek international cooperation with foreign universities... Currently, ... universities can only offer joint programmes in specific cases, and if the programmes meet a set of specified criteria. (p. 15)

Proposals were made to change the legislation so that universities:

would be able to issue joint or double degrees when cooperating with foreign universities. It is still a requirement that joint programmes offered in cooperation with foreign universities, and where only a part of the education takes place abroad, are organised according to an economical balance between incoming and outgoing students. (ibid.)

The study found that not only legislative differences for conferring a joint degree, but also varied institutional agendas had an impact on the current configuration of the award of degrees. Since the beginning of cooperation, Universities D and E continue to award double degrees. In the consortium coordinator's view these are the universities:

that cannot issue joint degrees, that's related to national matters, ...[country D] says no, we don't go for joint degrees, at least at the moment but it seems that it might change and for [country E]... as well. (interview, 20 October, 2015)

However, as the study shows, University E only offers one-year Master programmes and it is a school policy not to award joint degrees. While some academic staff at University E did not even know about the degree situation, staff at University D expressed the desire to offer a joint degree as soon as time permits. Unlike the consortium coordinator, academic coordinator of University D believes that “the ideal in the consortium is to award joint degrees” (interview, 5 November, 2015). He says:

we have been barred from doing so by national legislation until recently. There has been an easing, significant easing of those restrictions and I think the only reason why we haven't made the transition from being an only double degree awarding partner to joint because we have been overloaded with reforms (national). (ibid.)

The departmental activities of University D including developments in SOLO, as have been described by directors of study programmes, take place in the midst of ‘a flurry’ of national higher education reforms. Based on the new Ministerial Orders regarding the Study Programmes (2013) and University Examinations (2012), the university has prepared very detailed internal study programme regulations which need to be applied to all university-run study programmes. The director of studies shared a compilation of these regulations and the amount of work and the details that need to go into the document describing a study programme. The study regulations need to take into account all major national legislative pieces regarding study programmes, examination, grading, and assessment. Consequently, all programme descriptions would include such details as the objective of the programme, its structure, admission requirements, the size of the programme, a prescribed amount of credits for a final thesis (30 ECTS) and so on. The title and the degree awarded need to fit existing categories and the language used in national higher education system. At this point it is simply not in the interest of JP staff of University D to develop a joint degree as it is a task that requires a great deal of time and human resources.

The variations in governmental regulations are seen as complexities also affecting the integration of processes and a common curriculum:

The problem is to deal with five different university systems but even more, I think, this would be rather small, sometimes, the governmental regulations in these five partner countries. Let's say [country D]. There is a problem. [Country E], you know how they are. [Country A], for example, the system is different because in [country A] the system is a socialist system, don't forget that. So here,

it is not the university giving the degree, it is the Republic of [x]. So all the university laws are at the constitutional level. That means there is no chance, for example, that I can change a law that is against [country A] law. [Country C] was also very strict and, you know, the transformation was not so easy (Administrative coordinator, University A, interview, 7 June, 2016).

In practice, as an administrative coordinator of University A, who worked for SOLO since its beginnings, reflects:

in most of these Erasmus Mundus programmes, this jointness partly exists, and partly is made up. Because in one university, the Master thesis has to have 20 ECTS points, in another 15 ECTS points. OK, so what do we do? We do one module with 20 ECTS points and in one university it's just the Master thesis and the other one is a Master thesis and the colloquium. Shows the jointness that we have 20 ECTS in the Master module but in reality it is not joint. That's the problem the EU has because it's still here in the national law. But, I think, we are trying and it's why the programme is also very well running... but you will never be able [to achieve 100 percent jointness] and, I think, the programme which would be able to fulfil 100 percent jointness would be a boring programme because it's not possible, it would be in one country. Because, e.g., in [country D] the university starts on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, in [University A], on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, in [University B] the summer semester starts in April but in [country A] it starts in March and so on. This is the first term. Then second, for example, if you are a second year student at [University E], your Master thesis and the regulations of the [University E] says your Master thesis is not allowed to be more than 28 pages. That's the rules of the [University E]. The rules of most of the other universities is that it has to be at least 60 pages or 40 to 60 and in our case 60. But, for example, [country A], the law states the freedom of teaching, so if you are the supervisor and I send you my student I can tell you about the specialty of the programme but if you are a stubborn supervisor you say 'Yeah, that's fine, but if he writes with me, the Master thesis has to be 90 pages'. It's hard to write a 28 page paper which is good but it's also hard to write 90 pages and the other one has just 28 pages, so... It's different systems, this is what I think makes it interesting. (ibid)

As we may see, some of the tensions are imposed on the consortium by the respective national and organizational contexts of PIs, e.g., start of the academic year, the ECTS weight on the MA thesis and the length of the thesis (please see the following section for more details on organizational differences). How and whether tension areas are addressed, (i.e. the convergence of certain processes and implementation of jointness) depends on the PI's legal environment, the autonomy

of institutions and individual staff members in decision-making, and the structure and culture of the local university. Organizational and individual (meso and micro level actors) preferences, interests, motivation and approaches to what is important and what might work in their specific case also play a role.

Some elements of jointness are creatively and partially addressed with various solutions to satisfy the requirement, whereas other elements are left out. Some PIs award a joint degree, whereas other do not; thesis credits are combined with colloquia, and the thesis length varies according to JP unit requirements. The study indicates that full (100 percent) jointness and convergence of processes is not possible, nor is it seen as necessary by organizational members for a quality programme. In the consortium head's opinion:

there are conflicts with the primitive understanding of jointness and integration in Erasmus Mundus. Therefore we are sometimes a little bit of troublemakers in evaluations when we say: 'No, we are different. We are very voluntarily different in some of these processes'. (interview, 27 October, 2015)

The consortium coordinator highlights what to her seems to be contradictory to the idea of jointness promoted and supported by the EM programme major stakeholders:

the funny thing they want to make things common, homogenized things and on the other [hand] they want to have those Erasmus Mundus programmes, as kind of excellent different programmes to the normal offers and this is something which is strange to me as well, but one purpose is to really have homogenized European higher education landscape and some procedures, sometimes one has the impression they want to have same study content which we do not do, they want to achieve and they put it very clearly a high degree of jointness in the context of what they understand. (University B, interview, 20 October, 2015)

Another area of contestation brought up by SOLO administrative staff is related to the emergence of an evaluation culture and the observance of quality among other JP providers. One of the 'best practices' that SOLO staff observe among other peer JPs is a written compilation and description of the JP quality system, instruments and procedures into so-called Compendiums. SOLO consortium staff claim to resist the practice of detailed descriptive and bureaucratic outlines such as Compendiums and instead promote and implement a more organic approach to quality assurance. This indicates that a practical-evaluative agency dominates quality work at the meso-micro level.

### *6.2.3. Organizational differences*

Organizational differences and partner universities “idiosyncratic cultures” (Academic, University D, interview, 4 November, 2015) contribute to an environment of institutional complexity in which SOLO PIs are trying to develop a common approach to quality and/or what may make a quality programme. SOLO staff identified academic culture differences as well as different ways of organizing academic work among PIs. Variations noted include issues related to curriculum and academic requirements (programme scope; thesis length; student workload; examination system; student assessment and grading), administrative and/or organizational processes, for example, semester dates, financial management and administration, and work ethics. PIs have also different resources and infrastructures such as a library with either plenty or lack of materials in English and other languages; number of graduate programmes; research output; the governance of institution; degree of autonomy of departments, and professional career paths for faculty. In the following sections the most pertinent issues affecting the provision and implementation of quality issues in the SOLO programme are presented and analysed. These findings are mostly drawn from interview data.

Assessment, the grading system and examination practices are part of the organizational and/or national academic culture. SOLO partner universities use their own grading systems and mechanisms for processing grades and these differences remained. Academics point out that in country B it is difficult for students to get the highest grade, whereas in country D, one could, and it is easier for students to get the highest grade in country C than in country D. Such cultural norms of PIs are seen by some SOLO faculty as a “source of frustration” (Academic, University D, interview, 4 November, 2015) because it happens that students’ final projects when selected for the best thesis award may not be of a comparable level. In the tradition of the University C, there would be two grades for the course, and each student has a little green book, where the grades are recorded personally by every faculty. Some faculty raised the concern that perhaps a variation of student work assessment is not a good thing, as students study in the same graduate programme, but their work is assessed differently. Nonetheless, the consortium did not develop a joint academic work assessment approach. Academic records of SOLO students at each PI are simply sent to a coordinating institution in order to prepare final transcripts.



Differences of organizing academic work such as semester dates and course schedules in some instances interfere with the SOLO timeline of joint academic activities which creates issues of engagement and streamlining processes. For instance, University E staff and students struggle to participate in Winter and Summer Schools as their regular classes are still on during those periods. University C had a different thesis timeline, however it managed to make adjustments so that students would be over with studies before the official graduation of the programme, grades could be processed and transcripts prepared in time. At University A, as commented by an administrative coordinator, if students choose the last examination date, it brings them into the next semester, but he “cannot stop it because these are the normal rules so we have overlapping things here” (interview, 8 June, 2016).

Credit and student workload differences were identified as a result of difference in academic cultures, organizational goals and/or national public discourse related to quality of HE. University E positions itself among the best universities worldwide. In order to compete in such environment, the demands for students need to remain high. University B, on the other hand, experiences pressure by a public debate to decrease student workload in order to reduce university dropout rates and a prolonged period of study (Consortium head, interview, 27 October, 2015).

In some instances the design and implementation of SOLO in relation with the local academic setting varies substantially from one PI to another. For instance, the SOLO programme at the University B is described as:

a very special constellation, it is funded by external fees, it is completely run in English, and it is very international... a very mobile cohort. These are all dimensions which differentiate this programme much from other programmes in the university... so therefore, it is like an exotic animal in that regard (Academic, interview, 26 October, 2015).

This consequently creates some tension points in the organization of SOLO. One instance, mentioned by a staff member, was the position of the central student organisation regarding the mobility requirements for SOLO students. The student organization was criticizing the fact that SOLO students have to go abroad for studies. As the coordinator of the programme noted, such critique went against the logic of a joint programme, whereas the student organization did not differentiate between local students in other programmes and SOLO students. At University E, on the other hand, the EM curriculum with the exception of Summer and Winter Schools is identical to a degree programme offered to non-EM students. The

language of tuition at the university is English and the student population is international.

The research shows that due to certain organizational arrangements and differences in local conditions/environment named above and also tuition fee arrangements, the composition of the student body (international vs. predominantly local), the language of instruction (English vs. local), there is a range of embeddedness of SOLO into existing university/unit structures. SOLO curriculum development and adjustments depend on academic traditions and the autonomy of JP units, existing curriculum offers at PIs, national study programme regulations, as well as faculty expertise and interests. While the consortium nurtured the idea of having a common core curriculum which is jointly developed by PIs, the only truly joint curricular experience and the ‘glue’ of SOLO are Winter and Summer Schools. Administrative and student support services specifically for SOLO students are provided where student numbers are higher and income from tuition fees is used to reimburse personnel (A, B, C universities). Table VI-3 provides a brief summary of SOLO programme academic and administrative arrangements at each PI.

**Table VI-3. SOLO organizational arrangements**

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>Degree awarded</b>	Joint	Joint	Joint + University diploma	Double	Double
<b>JP Curricula</b>	Designed at JP unit Courses shared with other departments	Some coursework specifically designed for JP Courses shared with other departments	Integrated with local programme Some curriculum: seminars, internships, more electives provided for JP students	Integrated into local programme Some coursework is replaced with W/S Schools Additional training in research	Local programme
<b>Winter / Summer Schools</b>	X	X	X	X	X Issues with conflicting schedules
<b>Student support services</b>	Special support arrangement	Special administrative arrangement	Special administrative arrangement	No special arrangement except for research support	JP students are treated as any other student

To a large extent, variations in study programme requirements found at PIs are affected by the national HE setting, i.e. governmental regulations and local organizational practices that contribute to a complex puzzle. An academic coordinator of University D noted that it is “quite a challenge to integrate a rather loosely-organized programme [SOLO] which, I think, also has its benefits... into such a rigid programme as we have it here” (interview, 5 November, 2015). Even Winter/Summer Schools pose a challenge to some PIs. Students “have to go to the Winter and the Summer School which makes a lot of sense within the [SOLO] programme but it poses a challenge for us because we have to find 10 ECTS to keep out, what other "normal" students would take” (ibid.). The coordinator also adds “that if [SOLO] regulations would require change of our existing server [i.e. course offer], it would be extremely difficult because I couldn't just do it because it would affect at least some other, a lot of other programmes and institutes” (ibid.).

The collaborative work of SOLO takes place not only in the environment of different academic and organizational practices which are embedded in PIs' academic cultures and varied legal frameworks regulating the organization of academic work, but also in the environment of varied cooperation interests and power relations. Some PIs are very eager to be part of the consortium and would make significant necessary adjustments to adapt to the common project, whereas other institutions see the cooperation as “we can do without Erasmus Mundus but not the other way around” (Academic, University E, interview, 25 January, 2017). An academic staff member from University E also explains that academics in their country “were never very flexible with European regulations to change much” (ibid.), so the SOLO consortium had to adapt and adopt what was offered by the department there. An academic from University B makes an acute observation about the power relations of PIs which are inevitably present:

the cooperation is always the result of a contested, negotiation. And if you take into account that not only the national academic systems but also each university in the system is in a competitive situation, when collaborating abroad, either ones raises their own position or is careful not to lose reputation so every institution acts in a competitive environment from specific position, and when these institutions or people from institutions with these logics come together then it is clear that the relations are asymmetrical (interview, 21 October, 2015).

These asymmetrical relations of PIs and the points of tension that are part of the inter-organizational, collaborative nature of this JP need to be addressed in daily work.

## Section summary

The study shows that not only different stakeholder expectations and requirements exist, but also different interpretations and understandings about what makes a quality joint programme and what processes are necessary for success. In the case of SOLO, multiple stakeholder requirements and demands (EU, national, university), local university academic and organizational practices, power relations and interests of PIs affect JP practice. Accountability to and compliance with those requirements shapes the design and implementation of JP, the jointness of curriculum, the structures and processes. At the same time, as earlier research in IW suggests, contestations in the institutional logics and competing stakeholder demands not only add to the complexities of organizational actions, but may be the source and trigger of agency (cf. Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012) and could be exploited by actors to promote a particular practice. The idea of jointness and its role for JP excellence (quality) is questioned by SOLO PIs. The case of SOLO illustrates that a quality programme may exist with different levels of integration and jointness. Moreover, organizational actors exploit the contestation around jointness to their own interest. While some PIs no longer face legal obstacles for the implementation of jointness in the form of awarding a joint degree, the double structure continues to exist, also because not all PIs see joint degree as a necessity and/or immediate goal.

In the SOLO consortium, interests are exploited to develop a specific approach towards quality and its practice. Some institutions defend a particular curriculum and programme design (the level of integration), a configuration of degrees awarded (no single joint degree from all PIs), and a more organic approach to dealing with quality issues when these issues arise rather than following pre-defined and described detailed procedures. The engagement of organizations with quality issues at a meso-level shows variations of the normative and cultural-cognitive 'architecture' of JPs promoted at a macro-level and some 'best practices' taking place at other JP providers (meso-level). In line with the theoretical explanations of institutional work, we can observe how JP practice (as an institution) is created and sustained via actions (here inter-organizational arrangements and daily work) that are both defined and shaped by elements of institutional complexity as well as driven by organizational and individual actors' interests and goals.

In the following sections of this chapter attention is given to the approach and strategies adopted by SOLO staff to deal with the identified complexities of the

setting so that a shared understanding towards quality and its everyday practice could be built.

### **6.3. Micro-level foundations [of quality]: towards SOLO quality practice**

This section presents findings from the micro-level, the individual perspectives of JP staff. It further builds our understanding about JPs and how quality of such programmes is constructed and enacted in daily work. Research finds that the SOLO programme quality is constructed as multidimensional, multifunctional, developmental and as an ongoing enhancement-driven process. While the SOLO staff agree with the notion of EM programmes as kind of elite, high-quality prestigious programmes, they also acknowledge that in practice it is ‘learning by doing’, ‘trial and error’, experimentations, failure, striking the balance for what is relevant, and various requirements, and enjoyable learning. PIs have an interest and a desire to bring programme forward (Consortium coordinator, interview, 20 October, 2015), whereby staff exhibit a level of commitment to the programme in terms of teaching in the programme, minding linkages, engaging in curriculum discussions about consistency and connection of specializations with the general profile of SOLO.

While in general, the SOLO approach to ‘quality work’ follows the emerging JP quality discourse and its practice (section 5.4), it is evident that JP staff also exercise their agency by developing their own ways (specificities) to deal with multiple demands and contestations emerging from institutional complexity and building trust and common understandings about JP quality and its practice. These specific ways, discussed in this section include: ‘embracing differences’, ‘learning and support from peers’ and ‘developing a shared understanding’.

The SOLO quality dimensions and daily practices from the individual perspectives of staff running the programme are reviewed. Although not directly prompted, interviewees linked each dimension of quality with particular indicators and quality enhancing elements. The latter sheds light on how enhancement is interpreted and treated in everyday work situations.

#### *6.3.1. Embracing the differences*

The SOLO staff members have their ways of describing and dealing with differences (academic culture, organizational, legal, etc.) within the partnership. For the consortium head “the ongoing struggle about differences and multiplicity

of perspectives is solved not through conflict, but with debate and reflexivity” (interview, 27 October, 2015). Due to differences in legal frameworks in which SOLO operates and which to some extent may constrain JP departments’ choices in how programmes are structured and designed, a study director of University D sees flexibility as a “precondition for [SOLO] to work” (interview, 5 November, 2015). A teaching staff member from University G believes that “the way of addressing [differences] is rather to make them transparent and to explain than to really find a homogenous way of doing it” (interview, 26 October, 2015).

The consortium head believes that “this insistence on difference is ...[an] added value [in the programme].. and, [albeit unwritten], it is part of our quality strategy” (interview, 27 October, 2015). The idea is that differences need to be embraced and many processes and practices do not necessarily have to be homogenized in order to provide a quality programme. For instance, integration of curriculum which takes place through an understanding of different approaches and perspectives is a sample of SOLO staff agency in creating a particular approach to quality. The faculty agree that a common project and the participants of it are “enriched by these gaps and differences” (Academic, University B, interview, 26 October, 2015), and that it is staff’s responsibility to explain those differences to students, so that they know how to respond, manage them and benefit. Differences are then not perceived as tensions (e.g., Academic, University A, interview, 7 June, 2016). Different opinions, agendas, interests, cultures, understanding and mentalities about academic work and teaching are worked out through talking about it, adaptations to variations in practices, e.g. student workload and assessment and institutional forms of quality assessment.

Acceptance of and respect for differences is grounded in the institutional autonomy relating to financial and academic matters of PIs, to the extent they are not regulated nationally, and based on trust. Trust building is identified as one of the key principles of inter-institutional quality culture in JP quality practice (section 5.4). In the SOLO case, trust is built through getting to know each other (people, processes, how things work, and through academic research of colleagues at PIs) as well as learning from each other (exchange of experience, transfer of ideas, attitudes, approaches).

Understanding and dealing with differences is important as it affects ‘jointness’ in SOLO. One notable variation in the SOLO staff approach to quality is how ‘jointness’ is treated. As the coordinator pointed out, EU/EM structures “are really much in favour of jointness... in the context of what they understand” (Consortium

coordinator, interview, 20 October, 2015) which is not necessarily in line with consortium practices especially with regards to the study content that differs across PIs. In this particular EM case, ‘jointness’ does not mean complete curricular integration or homogenizing the academic environment, and procedures of academic assessment and student feedback. In fact, the whole programme is built around complementarities, varied specializations, differences, and interdisciplinary dialogue.

Some variations of academic culture, practices and understandings are prevalent in the everyday work situations. Some of these variations include (common) student assessment, a value of integrating internships into the curriculum, more curriculum transparency and common programme learning outcomes; these variations deserve a more in-depth engagement by the SOLO staff. Some of these issues like student assessment are deeply engrained in academic cultures of PIs. The value of internships and the need for them to become part of the curriculum is tainted either by national requirements (or absence of those), and institutional academic values. As the respondents pointed out, a lot of differences remain. One interviewee stated: “there are plenty of differences...it’s a constant process that we are trying to find something accepted by all solutions” (Administrator and academic, University C, interview, 26 January, 2016).

While curriculum coordination and transparency of content is understood to be important to assure the SOLO quality, the consortium does not aim at unified programme learning outcomes. The SOLO programme is built around some core elements and complemented by elements provided by each partner university. Such an approach to curriculum design may not be quite in line with ‘jointness’ promoted by the EM ideal and the idea of clearly defined and structured common study programme learning outcomes which is gaining momentum in the EHEA (an element of quality practice). The idealized value of ‘jointness’ promoted by the EM structures and JP networks takes a somewhat different shape in SOLO and may be specific to different JPs and contexts. As described by a SOLO staff member ‘jointness’ and integration of curriculum is “partly existing and partly made up” (Administrative coordinator, University A, interview, 7 June, 2016) (for more detail see section 6.2). As a faculty member from University B noted “from our daily work, there is no way of really homogenizing it because all the programme at each and every partner institution, part of the national context or particular university context” (interview, 26 October, 2015). In her perception, this sort of homogenization is not only difficult to achieve but also “not really in the interest of

the programme” (ibid.). The consortium head confirmed that it is not in the PIs interest to diminish differences.

### *6.3.2. Learning and support from peers*

Learning from partners and other peer institutions helps SOLO staff to develop the JP. In the initial stages of programme implementation, the consortium members participated in EU organized conferences about EM programmes and their organization, however, the consortium head acknowledged the fact that it was “difficult to learn from other Erasmus Mundus programmes” (interview, 27 October, 2015), and easier to learn from other programmes in the same study field. “... so one of the mechanisms for us to develop new features is the integration into global consortium of [the same study field] programmes, which is about sixty-five programmes worldwide” (ibid.). SOLO consortium members, especially the lead institution was actively involved in the creation, growth, and functioning of a global consortium uniting peer programmes and their institutions worldwide. Direct engagement in the exchange and learning about content, curriculum, and research matters was noted as a driving force for improvements and developments in the features of SOLO. University D which joined the SOLO consortium later, while in the process of developing curriculum, found the engagement with peer HEIs through this global consortium especially valuable. It was also found that some PIs, University C and D in particular, used both the SOLO consortium and global consortium ideas for lobbying purposes and backing up some curricular or administrative/procedural changes that SOLO staff wanted to implement to the benefit of the SOLO programme at their departments/faculties.

SOLO staff members relied on peer learning and support to deal with tensions to reconcile compliance with enhancement arising from local institutional/national requirements. SOLO staff members agree that national compliance is a recurrent issue which creates certain challenges: “we discuss how to deal with them and what will be the implications for country A and B, if country C has to do this or that so yes, this is obviously a recurring issue. But there is a good understanding that you need to please your local kings” (Academic and administrative coordinator, University D, interview, 5 November, 2016). In such cases JP staff share ‘evasion strategies’ in order:

to get around as likely as possible so we can do what we want to do so that’s the attitude that yes, we certainly don’t want to offend them or alienate them or anything like that and I do raise a question now and then and say ‘Oh we



probably need to', to adjust our way of doing things, but there is also a sense that we also want to pursue this programme as we like it to be (ibid.).

An academic from University D further elaborates on daily work in the midst of JP complexities:

the national context in the countries which have detailed regulation will supersede the consortium and the consortium will adapt when the member is confronted with very heavy handed requirements. The consortium will somehow cope and deal with it and adjust when necessary. When it's really, sort of, tangible heads on. But, of course, we inspire one another and .. [consortium head] has taught us all a lot on evasion strategies. Please the bureaucrats and do what you've always done, he is very good at that, and I think we have not, perhaps, benefited so much directly, but, I think that the previous hit of the [university C] programme did (ibid.).

### *6.3.3. Developing a shared understanding of quality*

To get the programme 'off the ground' and to run it successfully, SOLO staff had to agree upon some common principles and baseline standards. Initially it was important to develop a shared core idea of the programme and understand various profiles of PIs and their contribution to the JP. In addition, a common understanding about the role of research in teaching, organizational aspects, the administrative support, e.g. the establishment of a coordinator's position and his/her role at PIs, was found to be important. Some common consortium standards, rules, procedures, and general guidelines emerged step by step through interaction, discussions, collaboration, mobility of staff, granting of awards and understanding differences.

A standard of transparency was established by practicing evaluation activities of teaching and organisational aspects (see 6.1.4); discussing their results at consortium meetings; benchmarking various practices, and contributing to external reporting. Scheduled bi-annual SOLO meetings are always held during Winter and Summer Schools. These schools were identified by respondents as the main venue for direct interaction, discussions, and exchange of ideas. Academic staff members observe that Winter and Summer Schools are "the elements holding together or creating some kind of Erasmus Mundus spirit among students and teaching staff" (e.g., Academic, University C, interview, 27 January, 2016). Meetings of all PIs are used for building co-understanding. It happens that power play comes into action when "talking about what is done in one place and then trying to convince the

others to use those instruments” (Academic, University B, interview, 21 October, 2015). For instance, baseline standards for student workload, common quality denominators of a research project, and certain methodological and practical aspects related to the thesis were discussed. Based on a common practice of scholarly work staff shared their insights about what makes a good thesis and introduced the best thesis award. Theses are nominated by each PI and read by academic staff members from each institution. However, an academic from University E shared that she is assessing from her point of view whereas colleagues from PIs:

were reading this from another point of view so it was very difficult to agree. It was a matter of academic practice, a number of people read the dissertation, then we voted and we ranked them and the one that got more votes won the prize. (interview, 25 January, 2017)

While this practice might show where academic staff position themselves and what is regarded academic excellence to them, it does illustrate that academic staff chose not to come up with explicit common criteria for assessing thesis work.

Benchmarking practice or quality benchmarks that take place among PIs, as expressed by one of the academic staff members, is “more as a convention.., not as written out set of rule” (University E, interview, 24 January, 2017). Nonetheless, the findings indicate that benchmarking enables reflexivity about current organizational practices, aids transparency and change towards “more uniformity”...:

we needed to enlighten one another on what that entails but also to, perhaps, adjust our practices so they conform better with one another and just describing what we did in a way which would enable to present it in a table in parallel with what they did elsewhere. It kind of prompted you to rethink what is that we do, what is that we offer. Should we, perhaps, do it slightly differently to ensure more uniformity. I think that has, sort of, notched everybody a bit and facilitated quite a bit of change. (Academic, University A, 2 June, 2016)

External evaluations of the programme as well as accountability to the EU structures of the EM is seen by SOLO staff as the occasion to not only describe and share how things work at each institution, but also to deliver jointly developed reports. The consortium head explains how in his view, common understanding emerges:

I guess, on the one hand... we had three or four times evaluations, so you have to prepare jointly to answer questions from outsiders and I guess that is the first

way to create this atmosphere of the common understanding what the quality is. Second, we are confronted by students who travel, so their report to us that last semester it was different in [University A], and therefore we insist here on the same changes, so I guess we are invited both from above and from below, so it's to permanently reflect on what is possible to improve (interview, 27 October, 2015).

External monitoring and evaluation conducted via regular reporting to the EACEA while benefiting organizational actors in the development of shared understanding, also shows elements of symbolic legitimacy in order for the JP staff to maintain particular aspects of EM quality. An academic coordinator from University A also notes that “what comes out in such contracts [EM] of the EU is what they want to hear” (interview, 7 June, 2016). Organizational actors talk about the perceived importance of language used while talking/reporting about the existence and practice of QA. For example, central offices knowing the discourse are checking the terminology and language of JP reports prepared for EM structures, and external evaluators. The increased professionalism and the phenomenon of ‘quality workers’ is among the unintended outcomes that the practice of quality brings. This has been observed in other studies on quality in HE (cf. Stensaker, 2008) and is becoming an accepted way of dealing with quality demands.

Shared meanings and understanding about quality are groundwork to normative and cultural-cognitive elements of JP quality practice. JP quality practices are based upon, created, and modified via the behaviour of actors (here, SOLO staff everyday work). In the course of collaboration, SOLO staff have developed a shared understanding that a quality programme needs to be based on core concept, baseline processes, transparency and respect for diversity of perspectives and practices. One notable variation from JP quality practice found in SOLO’s approach is how differences in academic cultures across PIs are treated. Rather than focusing on commonalities, SOLO chooses respecting, accepting, and in most instances celebrating diversity (of curriculum and academic cultures). Another variation is related to the spread of a culture of quality where evaluation activities and formalizing quality processes are at the core. The SOLO staff note that there was not only a trend of introducing more QA instruments especially student evaluation activities, but also formalizing, systematizing and describing all QA processes in a so-called ‘Compendium’. The consortium staff claim to have chosen a more ‘organic’ approach to the observance of quality, focusing on what is needed to be done rather than describing how QA works in quality manuals. These specificities and variations from the emerging JP quality discourse and practise

show how practical-evaluative agency of individual actors is exploited to create a particular approach to JP and its quality. These specificities and variations are best observable from the everyday work perspective and staff interpretations of quality practices. The following section describes in greater detail what quality means to SOLO staff, how it played out in their daily work, and what contributes to quality enhancement.

#### *6.3.4. Quality dimensions and practices in SOLO*

The review of internal consortium data included meeting minutes, observations of some meetings, interviews held with SOLO staff. The data provided insights on how the programme operates on the ground or micro-level. It became evident that SOLO staff view quality and related processes through the lenses of their roles, responsibilities, and tasks at hand. The agency of SOLO staff becomes manifest through organizational and personal interests, priorities, choices of a particular approach to collaboration, preferred actions and specific ways to address SOLO quality issues. Some faculty refuse to use or talk about the terms that may be found at macro and meso levels of quality discourse and the intentions attributed to quality driven activities such as ‘compliance’, ‘control’ or even ‘enhancement’:

Most of these terms, I consider to be completely empty or political. Why not phrase it more simple? Core task, people at the university or at university related institutes, like this one, is to teach students, because they want to teach. And if you invest time and energy thinking then you have the interest that reaches the ones who are in front of you. Interest and motivation to teach good. I'm truly convinced of that, except you talk about people were completely overworked and just given up enough, let's say. But the thing of course is, the ones who teach, are motivated to teach, and want the best for their students. And I would also assume that more students when they start the Master course, at the beginning but also while they do large part of the study, motivated to do that. And the big challenge is to bring these two motivations together in a way that both sides have the feeling they can do what they want and get something out of it. So, control and compliance doesn't fit for me in this process. It's people who are at one place, who want to learn or want to transmit what they know and the question is how can this process be created in the best possible way. (Academic, University B, interview, 21 October, 2016)

This also explains the resistance of SOLO staff to describe QA actions and instruments in detail in writing and the focus on developments and enhancements that are deemed to be important in their daily work. Such observations and findings

are in line with the distinctions made by HE quality researchers (e.g., Krause, 2012, Newton 2010) between more formal quality definitions characteristic to quality discourse and situated meanings of quality found in the departments as well as the tensions between QA as a bureaucratic and administrative task and the improvement of the quality of academic endeavors (Harvey and Williams, 2010a) (see section 2.1.1).

SOLO staff ideas about what quality means (here quality dimensions) and how it is played out in their daily practice resonates with earlier HE quality research, in particular Biggs' '3P' model (1993) of 'presage', 'process' and 'product' classification of teaching and learning as well as Gibbs' (2010) adaptation of Biggs's work and elaboration of quality dimensions. A presage dimension and its variables relate to the context before students start learning. For instance, funding, resources, quality of staff, students and research fall under this category. A process dimension includes aspects of what goes on as students learn and their teaching and learning environment. The product dimension is about outcomes of student learning (for more details see Table B-2 in Appendix B). Most of the quality descriptors with the exception of a few variables identified by Gibbs (*ibid.*) such as staff-student ratio and class size, were also brought up by SOLO staff. The interview data disclosed that when reflecting about quality, staff pay most attention to the following elements: curriculum, teaching, the role and importance of research; learning outcomes, educational gains and student success; administrative and organizational aspects such as communication and feedback, importance of data, student services and support; as well as profile and engagement of students. These four major themes that emerged from interview data are addressed in the next subsections.

#### *6.3.4.1. Curriculum, teaching and research*

Curriculum, teaching and research are core processes of any academic programme. The SOLO programme may be characterized by research-led teaching, an integration of different disciplinary, interdisciplinary, methodological perspectives, and research tracks. The programme shares a common concept or as it was called a general profile; however, each PI is focused on specific topics, a unique curriculum and thematic specializations. The lead institution aims at providing "portals" into different disciplinary directions which are further available to students as particular specializations at PIs (Academic, University B, interview, 26 October, 2015). Students thus have a choice in selecting the area of studies and studying it in depth.

As it was mentioned earlier, the insistence on curricular differences is treated as part of the quality strategy, whereas both integrating research into teaching as well as academic plurality are considered as quality indicators.

Institutional autonomy in the form of bottom-up curriculum developments and decision-making within the limits of national study programme requirements prevails. Teaching is based on staff's individual research preferences, to some extent student fit and their needs, and alignment with other courses in the programme. Some respondents note though, that teaching based on individual staff research is fine as long as there is transparency about the content taught. Academic staff of University D identified a lack of content coordination and academic plurality at their JP unit. SOLO staff acknowledge that it is difficult to achieve a common curriculum due to different specialization tracks at PIs. Due to this and the fact that students have different mobility tracks, programme learning outcomes remain "fluid" (Administrative coordinator, University E, interview, 23 January, 2017). Learning outcomes are explicit only at the level of coursework with some general statements and targets for the overall programme.

The quality of the programme is also constructed in terms of its relevance, i.e. addressing important questions in the curriculum and preparing students for professional and academic careers. Relevance takes into account students' profiles, and student needs and expectations. Instructors aim to find a middle ground for teaching and enjoyable learning or a balanced perspective between what academic staff think academic quality is and what kind of students are enrolled in the programme. Academic staff also believe that institutional and personal responsibility, interest and motivation of both students and staff, 'teaching well', and applying the most effective teaching approach and style contributes to the quality of teaching and the overall programme.

According to research participants, the organization of teaching and learning including explicit, regulated grading and assessment, and examination systems, promote quality teaching. JP staff apply their institutional policies and procedures regarding the organization of teaching and learning. University E serves as an example to other PIs for explicit institutional standards in this regard. While tension with regard to differences in grading and assessment among PIs were brought up, there is no consensus among staff whether common assessment and grading is necessary in SOLO (also see section 6.2.3).

SOLO staff find curriculum coordination and transparency important quality enhancement elements. At the coordinating institution (University B), a particular attention is paid to content-related discussions among faculty. Academic staff also initiated a new teaching format of team teaching for the benefit of students. They started sharing syllabi and being more open about the content taught, thinking of a common good, incorporating comments, not just teaching from an individual research perspective. Curriculum-related discussions among peer faculty are gaining momentum. It is seen to contribute to transparency of curriculum content, and consequently a shared understanding. Common understandings among SOLO academic staff thus is built through practising content-related collaboration, team teaching and sharing during the mobility periods. Heads of programme studies at PIs (SOLO academic coordinators), who teach and have a primary role of curriculum matters participate in joint consortium academic activities (Winter and Summer Schools, workshops, forums, conferences and consortium meetings), are engaged in SOLO curriculum discussions led by the consortium head, and converse and make decisions about changes, amendments and improvements in the curriculum. By opening up the process of teaching, an academic from University B notes, we have “established this [new] culture”<sup>15</sup> (interview, 21 October, 2015). Checking the quality of Master theses across PIs became an institutionalized joint practice that the consortium adheres to. It is used for benchmarking purposes of academic quality among PIs and also serves as an indirect check of academic staff work.

#### 6.3.4.2. *Learning outcomes and educational gains*

SOLO staffs’ commitment to student learning leads to additional dimensions of quality highlighted by the respondents, namely educational gains and outcomes. Student development and learning are seen by SOLO staff as programme quality indicators. Students learn what is “beneficial to them... in broad terms” (Administrative coordinator, University A, interview, 7 June, 2016) and develop distinctive qualities and capacities and, as a result, they gain advantages in the labour market. Academics (e.g., from University A and B) agree that studying in different academic environments (oftentimes students study at three institutions, two European and one non-EU associated PI), while confusing at times, provides opportunities for comparing academic cultures, living with different people,

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<sup>15</sup> A reference made was for the university B.

learning from each other, and thus developing flexibility and enhanced intercultural skills. These skills are of interest to entrepreneurs, notes academic coordinator at University A. According to the consortium head, encouraging the use of multilingualism during studies by not limiting academic readings to English, leads to multi-perspectives, enhanced competencies in foreign languages, and translation. Staff also note the development of students' critical thinking, communication, and research skills.

Tightly organized student groups and social contacts are linked to more engaged and collaborative student learning. It does happen, however, that in some instances when students come to a particular university for a final programme requirement (thesis), they may not necessarily invest in relationships with peers and faculty. In order to enhance student engagement, some teaching faculty involve students in course administration and research projects, encourage students to reflect on their activities. Through various forms of communication and feedback mechanisms students learn to express their concerns and provide feedback to the programme staff.

Programme staff views vary in relation to the acquisition of new skills through internships. Some institutions like universities C and D would go at length to accommodate students' interests in gaining experience through an internship by creating employer and alumni networks and creating flexible schedules. Staff at University E, however, is not willing at all to compromise the importance and value of academic training, whereas University A seems to be caught in between. On the one hand, it encourages internships, but on the other hand, University A faces the problems of internships that interfere with academic studies, students starting a semester late, and as a consequence, missing lectures.

Programme staff, nonetheless, agree that alumni success and their career paths are among key quality indicators. Alumni 'chapters' or divisions of a self-organized alumni network exist at PIs. The network organizes events for SOLO alumni. SOLO staff use the network to get in touch with alumni. In order to get insights about alumni career and employment trends, an alumni survey was introduced four years after the first cohort completed its studies, with a follow-up survey after another four years. The survey complements the general alumni survey data collected at PIs which is not necessarily representative of EM graduates due to anonymous nature of data collection. The results of the survey that was specifically created for SOLO programme alumni may be found on the SOLO website, however, not all interviewed staff members were aware of it. According to the staff,



readily available data about alumni, their professional careers and analysis of such data would help to judge the quality of the programme and its future directions:

what I would like to know much more, in terms of its future, is what the students are doing at the end of the programme. That, I was quite aware that data haven't come to us and probably it's not even collected systematically, I do not now. And if that data says that it's running very well, people are doing good jobs and a lot of people are doing good research... I know one of my students here, he is into academics and he is doing very well. So I would like to know more examples of that kind and not just from [University E] but also from the other places. People are going to research, they are teaching somewhere, they are doing very well. (Academic, University E, interview, 24 January, 2017)

#### *6.3.4.3. Administrative and organizational infrastructure*

SOLO staff describe the programme as “tightly” organized (Academic, University A, interview, 2 June, 2016; Consortium coordinator, interview, 20 October, 2015). This, in most instances, differentiates SOLO from the local programmes at partner universities. Having a designated staff person responsible for organizational and administrative issues makes a big difference, especially in student support issues. Student services and support is an important element of everyday work, especially of the administrative staff. At PIs (University A, B and C) which have more administrative capacity for student support, students receive special treatment. The idea of student support is to serve students and let them concentrate on their studies. Support services for students include offering information about the programme, processing admission papers, and helping with information/academic resources and libraries. Among the primary goals of such services available to students are “assuring that students receive information and support needed to study as foreseen” (Consortium coordinator, interview, 20 October, 2015), i.e. progress, as planned.

By creating additional support structures and better functioning procedures (University C), building necessary linkages with centralized university services (University A), SOLO staff were concerned to change slow, inefficient and not necessarily a student-centred approach to services (University A). Although not identified explicitly by staff members, student support services address student retention and graduation rate which are considered to be important quality indicators by central university structures. More importantly, a different approach to student support, an implementation of more effective practices were changing and disrupting organizational/academic culture of universities.

Creating appropriate and effective communication channels at various levels and among various stakeholders was found to be another key element in daily work contributing to cross-fertilization, the transparency and consequently the enhancement of the programme. Via the means of frequent and intense interaction, either in person at various meetings, academic and social events or using ICT technologies, SOLO staff discuss curriculum-related, organizational and administrative matters and quality issues; exchange information about academic practices, and the alignment of the EM curriculum to local/national requirements; learn from each other about the discipline, theories and methodologies; share student feedback, opinions and experiences with the programme/students; bring up issues and student needs; liaise with national HE authorities, other academic departments and administrative units, student organizations of the universities for lobbying purposes and faster and more efficient services to students. Communication within the consortium among PIs, either direct or through mediators (consortium head and coordinator, PIs academic and administrative coordinators), is described as personal, informal, fairly intense and frequent, open and frank, and is found by SOLO staff to be effective. Academic staff of PIs utilize other channels and opportunities to interact with each other, e.g., research-related activities as well as mobility opportunities.

SOLO staff use external reporting to the EU EM unit (also for accreditation purposes) as an opportunity for dialogue among each other. In their view, reaching an agreement and consensus for the EU evaluation is important, as it aids the development of a shared understanding. The consortium head also sees the reporting to the EU agency as a “permanent invitation to reflect upon... doing... invitation towards innovation” (interview, 27 October, 2015). At the same time SOLO staff acknowledge that they are learning in the reports to describe programme functioning in a particular way, using certain language. Thus, both the coercive and symbolic elements are played out through this external quality monitoring instrument (see a discussion of these elements in section 3.1).

As it was noted earlier (section 6.1.4), the consortium internal evaluation and feedback practices are prevalent in programme quality monitoring. With regards to the centralized university wide teaching/course evaluation completed by students, SOLO staff note that despite the fact that the results give an overall picture about the course and a teacher, they are found to be inadequate for monitoring needs of SOLO as there is no reference specifically to SOLO students. Central offices of PIs use student evaluation results for instance for ranking and promotion (University

E), internal benchmarking purposes (University C and E). The following issues with centralized evaluations were identified by SOLO staff: lack of survey data reliability in cases of low student numbers filling out surveys due to the voluntary engagement in evaluation activities (University B and C), and inability to distinguish SOLO student specific issues due to the anonymity of surveys and timing of surveying (e.g., at University A course evaluations are carried out every two years).

Despite the limited value of centralized course evaluations, these are not particularly called into question by SOLO staff. They are part of a regular, established routine. “We all live with these evaluations, nothing people discuss or confront per say, the thing is how do you interpret evaluation, what dangers are related to that” (Academic, University B, interview, 21 October, 2015). “Classes are evaluated on a regular basis, this is the usual rule within the University [A]” (Academic coordinator, University A, interview, 7 June, 2016). These regular established routines suggest taken-for-granted, i.e. institutionalized nature of centralized course evaluation practice and the reproduction of it driven by iterative-habitual agency of staff who carry over the practice (please see earlier discussion on agency in section 3.3).

To supplement centralized forms of anonymous teaching/course evaluation provided by students at the end of a term, as well as to tackle SOLO specific issues, staff created an atmosphere and channels of open student feedback either directly or through student representatives. Student meetings with SOLO staff are organized to get feedback about issues with courses and teachers (monthly – at University A), the overall experience in the programme (mid-semester at University C). The consortium runs “institutionalized cycles in the Winter and Summer School where students have the explicit task to discuss about the programme and how it is performed at different places” (Academic coordinator, University A, interview, 7 June, 2016). As the consortium coordinator observes, close contact with students allows programme staff to know student needs, encourage them to share their experience through formal feedback mechanisms (filling out surveys) and allows better interpretation of the results. Staff also note that students in general are very open about their experiences, and they have suggestions for improvements and changes. In some cases certain communication channels work better to solicit open feedback, e.g., one-to-one sessions, or informal social gatherings. Both administrative and academic coordinators liaise between

faculty and students. Soliciting information from students, therefore, helps staff to monitor the situation and decide on follow-up actions.

Student feedback, the availability of information and sharing of it enables predictability and transparency, which are elements of quality enhancement and assurance processes. Respondents have noted that for the central administration data about the demand for the programme, enrolment figures, dropouts and graduation rate are significant pieces of information indicating the quality and viability of programmes. For SOLO staff information about PIs, the curriculum of the programme, the content of what is taught, academic and organizational practices, exchange of student experience in joint consortium activities such as Summer and Winter Schools, awareness about the qualification of teaching staff were found to be of importance. For SOLO staff, readily available data about alumni, their professional careers and analysis of such data would help to judge the quality of the programme and its future directions. A University E academic staff member indicated that alumni data is very important in making informed decisions about the success of the programme, further collaboration and continuation of the programme: “It’s that follow up, the alumni data set that, I think, will really secure our interests, all of the partners interests, much more solidly” (interview, 24 January, 2017).

#### *6.3.4.4. Students as active participants in the process of creating value*

Student profile and selectivity are considered to be important elements contributing to SOLO quality. As faculty note, specifically for the SOLO programme, institutions can be more selective due to a high number of applicants. Students admitted to the programme have generally higher grades and are highly motivated. “They are really good” (Academic, University D, interview, 4 November, 2016) and “very enthusiastic students” (Administrative and academic coordinator, University D, interview, 5 November, 2016). The quality of students in comparison to other local programmes is, therefore, quite high (Administrative and academic coordinator, University C, interview, 25 January, 2016). The only exception is University E, where the same criteria is used for all applicants across the programmes in the department. In that case it is not necessarily the academic level that differs, but rather student backgrounds and a different profile of students who are applying to SOLO programme. In most PIs, JP students mingle with local students in the classes. This creates either a more international (University C and D) or as in the case of University E, a more diverse student body. In the view of the

academic coordinator of University D, SOLO student profiles add “credibility” (interview, 5 November, 2016). A different mix of students, incredibly varied backgrounds makes SOLO student groups distinct, enriches student body with different perspectives (University C). SOLO students are characterized as having more experience, more interested in particular academic issues, learning of foreign languages and more varied career orientations (University E).

SOLO academics believe that students actively participate in creating value by engaging in cooperative learning environments, bringing various perspectives as well as providing feedback and suggestions. For instance, at some PIs where an interactive style of teaching and learning dominates, students are also more involved in in-class discussions. The diversity of student perspectives coming from their varied academic and cultural backgrounds, the exchange of these perspectives among students, and interaction with faculty enable “out of the box thinking” (Academic, University C, interview, 27 January, 2016) of both students and teaching staff, and hence enhances the quality of teaching and learning. Moreover, the academic coordinator of University D who was involved in the design of the programme and is still teaching to this date, is convinced that students along the way helped to improve the programme. One notable change that staff talked about was introducing a joint element of the programme, i.e. SOLO Winter School, based on student feedback and requests. PIs, e.g., University D made adjustments in the curriculum and examinations at the request of students.

### **Programme enhancements**

Overall, since the start of SOLO, various changes and improvements were made to the programme. Respondents made observations about them over time in curriculum and teaching; administrative, organizational, also quality-related organizational processes and practices (for the latter see 6.1.4). Necessary human resource changes took place with new additions to departments; staff confidence to organize things differently grew, as well as self-esteem in teaching capacity and experimentation with new teaching approaches. New curricula were developed with ongoing changes and amendments at various partner universities. An academic staff member gave an example of a required course curriculum development for the first year students: “This is something that we have developed in 2005-2006 and which really got revised and expanded every year, this is a good example of how long it takes to really come up with a reading list and seminar topics” (Academic, University B, interview, 21 October, 2015). University E which

runs SOLO on the basis of its local programme, made desired curriculum changes and additions at the occasion of the start and development of SOLO. By taking advantage of the SOLO experience, University D developed a new curriculum with the help of staff expertise from PIs. As a result of cooperation in SOLO, University D staff became more open-minded regarding the disciplinary differences and approaches. University C also reported that their staff's professional growth and increase in confidence is linked with possibilities to teach elsewhere and cooperate with the expanded network, benchmarking opportunities enabled by faculty exchange, and student evaluation results. In the area of joint processes, with the exception of University E that still applies its own set of admissions criteria, adjustments and changes to admissions criteria took place at PIs, common admissions criteria have been developed and joint processes improved remarkably. Staff also noted that over time there were considerable developments in communication structures among PIs, programme website and overall stability of JP network.

### **Section summary**

SOLO staff (micro-level) interpretations of programme quality and its developments are localized, that is, targeted towards daily work activities and individual roles and tasks. The individual staff roles and tasks, however, are to a large extent framed by organizational structures, requirements and practices (consortium, department, university) and also external regulations (national and EM). Therefore, SOLO staff designed and implemented the programme and its quality enhancement processes and instruments balancing between stakeholder demands and how they saw it best fit.

SOLO staff interpretations of quality focus on aspects of curriculum, research integration into teaching, 'teaching well', student learning outcomes and educational gains. Quality developments and tools implemented are, therefore, targeted towards the development and enhancement of these primary activities and core processes of the programme. Due to the specificity of the cross-border collaborative nature of SOLO, some aspects of the process dimension such as programme administration and organization, communication and student feedback are found to play an important role in SOLO quality enhancement efforts, whereas student support services and communication needs are found to be highly context-specific.

When reflecting upon changes and developments of the programme both in terms of academic and administrative issues, a University D administrator noted: “we do whatever we can to make the programme better, well designed” (interview, 6 November, 2015). This is a good representation of how SOLO staff approach everyday work in providing a quality programme. Students are seen as catalysts of this process via their active engagement in learning, open feedback about their experience with the programme and suggestions for improvements. Such findings show that enhancing the educational processes and student learning experiences on the ‘shop-floor level’ are an important part of everyday work.

These multiple dimensions of quality that are found to be important by staff embody the holistic approach to quality promoted in various JP quality guidelines and handbooks (summary in section 5.4). Such findings confirm that the emerging JP quality practice where various elements and aspects of academic programme matter are maintained by actors at a micro-level.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter I analysed and presented findings from a selected JP case. The case provides insights into JP quality developments taking place at meso and micro levels. I observed how the emerging JP quality discourse and practice is to a large extent carried over via formal inter-organizational arrangements at the meso-level of the JP partner institutions and the consortium, and via everyday work of individual staff members at a micro-level. The SOLO leadership team organized major inter-organizational arrangements regarding the design and implementation of quality programme, the processes of its evaluation and enhancement. University leadership served a more formal role of endorsing the project and its arrangements at HEIs, whereas JP staff directly engaged in quality-driven practices through their daily tasks and responsibilities.

The case study brings to light the elements of institutional complexity such as multiple levels of working, areas of contestation and organizational differences that need to be addressed in the collaboration and development of quality practice. On the one hand, I observed top-down requirements and demands coming from macro-level players (EU institutions, national governments, EM structures), and on the other hand, I found organizational (JP partner institutions) practices, interests and agendas as well as personal and individual interpretations and understanding of quality and actions for how it ought to be addressed. I find that SOLO embodies the EM programme model promoted by macro-level actors albeit with some

specificities in the approach to quality and its distinctive elements developed at meso-micro levels.

Via inter-organizational arrangements of the consortium and everyday work, SOLO staff both reinforce and reproduce the emerging approach of JP quality as *fitness-for-purpose* and its practice focusing on normative orientations for value added and innovation. Through everyday practices, SOLO staff participate in co-creation and maintenance of a two-dimensional approach to quality focusing both on the programme content/curriculum and administrative, and student support structures. Quality practice is built around the principles of ongoing activities of assessment and evaluation as well as stakeholder engagement in these processes.

The data from this particular case setting also indicates that within JP units there was experimentation with the introduction of student feedback and evaluation instruments; more effective and expanded student support services; and ‘opening up curriculum.’ These practices added a new dimension to the way things are organized and handled at PIs, indicating signs of the changing organizational/academic culture of universities. In this JP case setting, these new organizational arrangements were exploited by staff through practical-evaluative agency allowing them to make changes and defend them at the organizational level. Such findings reflect Smets *et al.* (2012) analysis of actors’ agency in an environment of novel institutional complexity.

The case of SOLO also confirms Harvey and William (2010a) (see section 2.1.1) conclusion about the tension found between quality assurance as a bureaucratic and administrative task and the improvement of the quality. Following IW theorization, I relate this tension to the contested areas arising from the environment of institutional complexity and the multiplicity of actors, their demands and requirements. I find that SOLO staff exercise a practical-evaluative agency in dealing with this tension. They have developed what Shatzki (2001) (see also section 3.3.5) calls a ‘shared practical understanding’ that programme improvements and daily tasks should be prioritized over a bureaucratic task of describing in great detail how quality assurance needs to take place by outlining all the processes, procedures and instruments. In SOLO those shared understandings though informed by broader cultural frameworks are ‘local.’

The IW theoretical approach in this study indicates that actions and agency are driven by actors’ interests and goals. By taking a different position and response to certain aspects of JP quality promoted at a macro-level (such as a more organic



approach to quality work mentioned above, the level of curriculum integration and the degree structure, discussed earlier), organizational actors choose to act upon their interests and goals following their understanding of quality. In this case, such collisions in daily work illustrate the agency of actors and the variations in the emerging normative and cultural-cognitive basis of JP quality practice.

## VII. DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Drawing on the empirical data provided in Chapters 5-6 and the subsequent analysis in light of the theoretical framework developed, in this final chapter of the thesis I provide consolidated answers to the research questions and discuss findings in relation to previous research in the fields of HE quality and IW. Furthermore, I offer insights in contributions to these fields. I also briefly reflect on theoretical and methodological choices made and advantages as well as limitations that were the result of these choices. I conclude the thesis with practical and theoretical implications of the study as well as a brief discussion on future research avenues.

This study on the IW of quality explores the phenomenon of JPs and their quality practice in transnational HE. The thesis aims to develop an enhanced understanding of the relational as well as situated nature of HE quality and its practices by examining how quality in cross-border collaborative arrangements such as JPs are constructed, enacted, and with what institutional outcomes. The study explores how the discourse and practice of quality emerge and are promoted and supported by HE stakeholders in the EHEA; how staff of HEIs that are engaged in JP provision build awareness about programme quality through experiencing multiple, oftentimes contradictory national regulations and competing discourses of quality; how they develop a shared understanding of what JP quality is and how it should be addressed; how they manage to overcome tensions arising due to the environment of institutional complexity to which JPs are exposed.

The role of actors, their agency and the activities taking place at various levels (macro, meso, micro) are analysed in the construction and enactment of certain quality practices in order to discern whether a particular institutional practice is created, maintained, and/or disrupted. Guided by the theoretical lenses of institutional work, the following research questions are addressed in the study:

- RQ 1. What are the joint programme developments in the EHEA?
- RQ 2. How is quality of joint programmes constructed and enacted?
- RQ 3. What is – from the institutional work perspective – the practice of quality in joint programmes?
- RQ 4. Does the practice of joint programmes and their quality lead to enhancement?

A multi-level study of JPs and their quality developments in the EHEA is carried out based on document analysis, primary and secondary data from a selected JP (SOLO) and its institutional environment. Below a brief summary to the answers of research questions is provided including discussion and reflections.

### **7.1. Joint programme developments in the European Higher Education Area (RQ.1)**

A joint study programme is a form of collaboration among higher education institutions (e.g. universities) grounded in inter-organizational arrangements such as a cooperation agreement, strategies for the joint programme design and implementation as well as degree award structures (double, multiple or joint). Staff and student mobility, shared resources, mutual recognition of studies, joint processes, integrated and/or a flexible curriculum are the main features of these collaborative programmes. Joint programmes emerged among European universities in the late 1980s. Early in 2000 and onwards, such programmes have received a renewed interest in the EHEA developments.

JPs and their quality practice in the EHEA are found to be a multi-actor, multi-layered, and multi-purpose phenomenon. As the study shows, multiple actors (Appendix H) such as the EU and national policy-making institutions and bodies, HEIs and their representative structures and intermediary organizations such as networks and associations, JP providers (universities and their staff) are involved in the design, implementation, promotion, and dissemination of this collaborative form of HE activity, hence contributing to the emergence of JPs, their quality discourse and practice. The conception of quality and related activities and solutions are thus constructed through the interaction of processes and activities taking place at macro, meso, micro levels. Macro-level actions and activities are undertaken in policy, networks and associations of HEIs and national quality agencies; meso-level implies inter-organizational arrangements set among JP providers (HEIs and their consortia), and everyday work is carried out by JP staff in HEIs (micro-level).

At a macro-level, JPs are explicitly envisioned to address a variety of higher education, economic, and international development issues such as

- Attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA and economy
- Employability, labour market demand for a highly skilled, adaptable and talented workforce

- Enhancement of HE quality and its assurance
- Cooperation between EU and other parts of the world, as well as enhancement of intercultural understanding.

In the face of global competition, policy instruments such as the EM joint programme were designed to support HE internationalization, modernization, boost innovation of HE and enhancement of career prospects. The study finds that JPs are deployed by HEIs as a form of internationalization. The selected case also illustrates that HEIs engaged in cooperation are interested in innovations in their academic field as well as the enhancement of teaching and research, particularly via interdisciplinarity. JP inter-organizational arrangements made for collaboration are also driven by other organizational goals such as enhancing the visibility and prestige of the institutions due to the perceived value of JPs, achieving necessary changes and developments whether in the area of curriculum, resources, or internal organizational structures.

Despite the political attention and involvement of multiple actors at various levels, JPs in the EHEA remain rather exclusive. The majority of JP costs in the EHEA continue to be met by European funding mechanisms and HEIs. Earlier studies on JPs indicated that it was trendy among HEIs to offer JPs (Michael and Barlaj, 2003, Obst, Kuder and Banks, 2011). HEIs are interested in the development of this collaborative form of activity which is perceived to be of high quality. As it was argued in the thesis, the Erasmus Mundus programme in the EHEA has gained a brand of excellence. However, regardless of the perceived as well as reported value of JPs, according to the latest Bologna Process reports there has not been a substantial growth of such programmes. According to the existing statistics less than 25% of HE establishments in the EHEA are participating in JPs, and student enrolment of the total student body in such programmes remains very small (0.01%).

Whereas in this study, I did not aim to analyse the reasons for JP growth or, thereof, absence of it, the trend may among other things be due to the environment of institutional complexity in which JPs operate and their practice is co-created and maintained. The multiplicities of settings, referred to above, naturally increase the institutional complexity, i.e., competing demands and multiple logics (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011). JPs are embedded in European and national HE fields, organizational structures and practices of JP provider HEIs and their academic traditions and cultures. I argue that the multiplicity of purposes and roles attributed to JPs by multiple actors in addition to national regulatory variations in HE systems,

requirements to automatically recognize parts of JP studies undertaken by students at partner institutions, and the validation of quality of JPs via external programme accreditation schemes contribute to the complexity of JP practice. Consequently, JP providers face multiple levels of working and organizational differences (academic culture and practices). As a result, contestation and tensions surround joint activities. They are part of the inter-organizational, collaborative nature of JPs that need to be addressed in daily work.

While not a massive phenomenon, this form of collaboration attracts the interest of universities and academic communities. HEIs are involved in offering JPs, whereas their representative structures such as EUA and specialized JP networks promote the institutionalization of this practice by identifying and coding best practices in manuals and guides, offering professional development related to JPs and their quality issues for those on the 'ground level' directly engaged with the provision of JPs.

## **7.2. Joint programme quality construction and enactment (RQ.2)**

JP quality is constructed by key higher education stakeholders and their intermediary organizations and enacted through legal instruments, inter-organizational arrangements of JP provider institutions and their everyday work. The emergence of a JP quality discourse and practice was guided by policy recommendations and soft legal instruments adopted in Bologna ministerial meetings (such as the ESG and EAQAJ), handbooks, manuals, frameworks, and models developed by professional associations and networks. Much of this work has been prompted by the experience of JP providers and their best practices.

The research finds that quality of JPs is conceptualized as 'high', having added value, whereas EMJPs are foreseen as centres of excellence, contributing to the enhancement of higher education through innovative products and services. JP quality practice is tied to the concept of fitness-for-purpose. However, as we have seen, the purposes are manifold, and defined by multiple stakeholders. Effective and efficient JP programmes, nonetheless, need to meet the objectives, achieve set outcomes and demonstrate the above-mentioned elements. Inter-institutional quality culture in JP settings feature commitment to quality, and the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. This is facilitated through building trust, transparency, shared understanding of academic cultures and practices, programme aims and outcomes, and its strengths and weaknesses. Quality practice is viewed as a holistic

(covering all aspects of the programme) and continuous process of assurance which includes assessment, evaluation, and enhancement-driven activities.

The EU institutions have, especially for EM programmes, put forth certain goals and standards that need to be met by JP providers. Accountability and compliance with the requirements set by various stakeholders shapes the construction and enactment of quality in JPs. The principles, values, and standards of JPs and their quality practice discussed above are found to dominate quality-related developments in the studied case which has been held as an example of best practice for other JPs. Organizational actors participate in the co-creation and maintenance of JP quality practice by designing and implementing JP and its quality that is built around these core principles. At the same time, JP providers treat these principles and standards as ‘the imagined norm’ which needs to be handled flexibly. Flexibility is needed to be able to handle institutional complexities and tensions arising due to multiple requirements and interests. The study, thus, finds that the construction and enactment of JP quality work at meso-micro levels involves balancing multiple interests, adhering to various requirements, and adjusting to the specificity of the programme.

Barnett’s observation (1992) about a contested nature of quality and the fact that a contestation is hardly visible if studied only at a macro-level is confirmed by this study. Macro-level developments in the field of the EHEA (Chapter V) point at more formally defined (Krause, 2012) terms such as ‘excellence’, ‘fitness-for-purpose’, ‘accountability’ and ‘enhancement.’ But it is at inter-organizational and micro levels where contestation and tensions are observable, and solutions are found through everyday work enabled by collaboration, communication as well as exchange and sharing of information.

The case study explicates that quality of the JP at meso-micro levels is constructed as multidimensional, multifunctional, developmental and an ongoing enhancement-driven process. JP staff develop their own ways and specificities to deal with multiple demands and contestations emerging from the environment of institutional complexity. The following key strategies of organizational adaptation were observed: ‘embracing differences’, ‘learning and support from peers’, and ‘developing a shared understanding.’ These strategies broaden our understanding of organizational adaptation that has been identified in other IW studies (cf. Fox-Wolfgramm et. al., 1998; Woywode, 2002). These studies argued that because of the diffusion and adaptation of various concepts, rules, standards circulating in the field, both isomorphic and idiosyncratic tendencies in organizational structures are

observed at the same time. Moreover, tensions emerging due to the complexity may be a facilitator and enabler of organizational adaptations.

In line with some findings in earlier IW research studies (cf. Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012), competing stakeholder demands and contestations stemming from multiple institutional logics not only add to the complexities of organizational actions, but may be the source and trigger of agency exploited by actors to promote a particular practice. The findings from the case illustrate how organizational actors exploit contestations around jointness and arrangements for the degree type awarded to their own interests and understandings about JP quality. JP providers question the idea of jointness and its role for JP excellence (quality). The case of SOLO illustrates that a quality programme may exist with different levels of integration and jointness. In SOLO, the consortium develops a specific approach towards quality and its practice by upholding the programme design that does not feature full integration and jointness, e.g., of the curriculum and degrees awarded (no single joint degree from all PIs). The consortium also chooses a more organic approach to dealing with quality issues when they arise, rather than following pre-defined, detailed procedures. These findings show certain variations that deviate from the model suggested in the macro-level discourse and also some ‘best practices’ promoted by other JP providers (at meso-level).

### **7.3. Institutional work of joint programmes and their quality co-creation and maintenance: political agenda and everyday practice (RQ.3)**

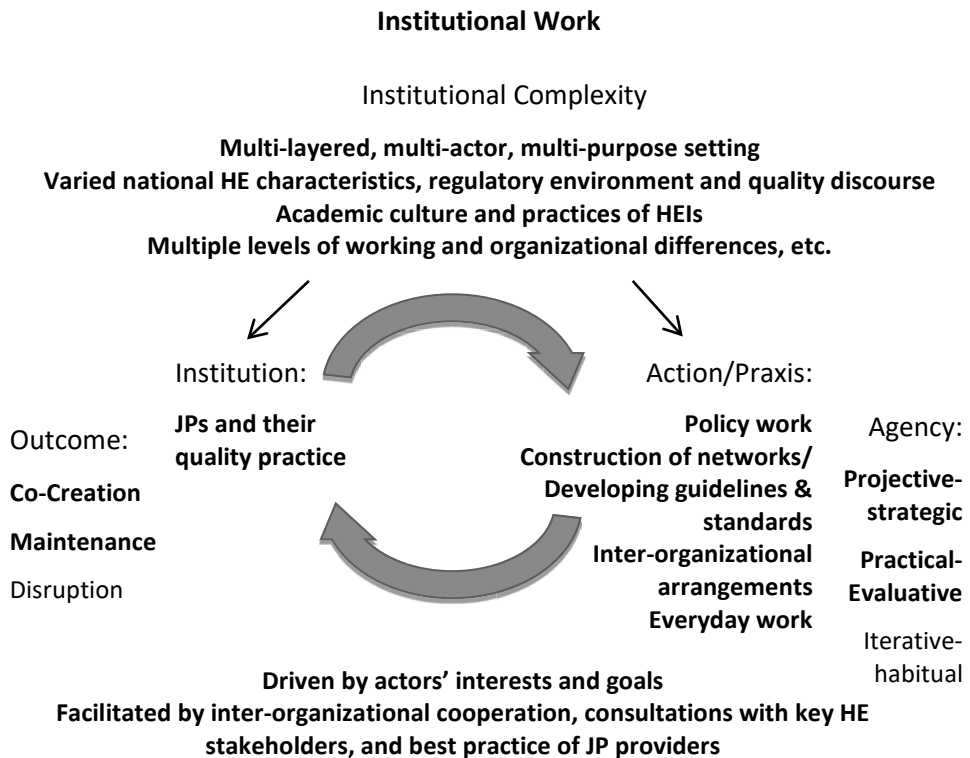
I now proceed to discuss the main elements and findings related to the institutional work of JPs and their quality as summarized in the Figure 3. I outline activities that were instrumental in the co-creation and maintenance of JPs and their quality practice which is viewed in the study as the institution.

The institutional complexity discussed earlier shaped the meaning of JP quality and its practice and had implications for the activities taking place. The findings indicate that the IW of JPs and their quality practice co-creation and maintenance is facilitated by inter-organizational cooperation, consultation with key HE stakeholders, and best practices of JP providers. It involves a combination of the following activities:

- policy work emanating from the political agenda and goals of HE reforms;
- newly established structures such as networks, associations, a register composed of mutually recognized actors, e.g. other HEIs offering JPs or

- national QA agencies;
- inter-organizational arrangements of JP providers;
- daily work of JP staff;
- development, dissemination and promotion of normative frameworks such as quality guidelines and handbooks via public means and professional training. Much of this work was grounded in ‘best practices’, and organizational praxis of JP providers.

**Figure 3. Institutional work of joint programmes and their quality practice<sup>16</sup>**



Due to the multi-layered nature of the phenomenon, the praxis of JP quality is relational. It is an interaction of processes, events and activities taking place in policy (macro-level), among and within HEIs (meso-level), and through daily work

<sup>16</sup> Constructs and elements in bold text are found/feature in the study



(micro-level). A recursive relationship among these activities is observed (see also Table V-11). At all of these levels activities are found to reinforce each other. Such findings expand theoretical explanations of the relationships involved in the process of IW. One of the key theoretical explanations is about a recursive relationship between agency and institutions (cf. Sminia, 2011; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010; Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012, etc.). The findings of this study also indicate recursivity which exists among various activities taking place at different levels.

In the policy realm, inter-organizational collaboration and consultation with key HE stakeholders was used to mobilize political, regulatory, and financial support for the institutionalization of JP practice. Policy was employed to confer a status of excellence to JP programmes, especially via the EM label. In order to meet the political agenda objectives, macro-level actors created a vision and profile of JPs, attributed certain roles and characteristics and set standards for its quality practice. The latter was facilitated and carried out by networks and associations, the intermediary organizations representing academic communities, students, quality agencies, and other HE stakeholders. In addition to generic standards and guidelines for QA in the EHEA (the ESG), JP-specific QA guidelines and manuals were developed. These outlined underpinning values, principles, expectations and good practice related to JPs and their quality assurance.

All main processes of institutionalization (Scott, 2008b) are observed in these activities. Regulatory pressures took place at a European and national level in the form of agreements and recommendations for the legal basis of JPs. Normative orientations were prescribed by assigning a status of high profile programmes and, in case of EM, a status of excellence; promoting certain values such as innovation, value-added, and jointness; adopting standards and by proposing a particular approach for quality assurance. Various elements of JPs and the implementation processes of these high quality programmes were grounded in the best practices of JP providers (HEIs), their cultural-cognitive framework of organizing.

A strategic-projective agency oriented towards the future has been driving activities taking place at a macro-level. As it has been observed, the projective agency of collective actors has a potential to both increase and decrease the institutional complexity. The complexity increases when an emerging institution is envisioned by actors to address multiple goals, and the practice is undertaken in highly varied institutional environments across national borders. The complexity may be reduced when actors work collaboratively with key stakeholders in the field

to define and design a common set of elements, characteristics, and standards of a new practice. Steps are taken to secure the support for the emerging institution by promoting its underpinning values, common principles, and standards, and to engage in advocacy and monitoring activities of a new practice.

At the meso-level, JP developments are undertaken by HEIs via inter-organizational arrangements among JP providers set to raise quality standards through joint actions in collaborative engagements as well as to meet their interests. Quality practice of the selected case features:

- common JP characteristics and the dominant approach to QA practice of JPs as *fitness-for-purpose* promoted at a macro-level and some ‘best practices’ taking place at other JP providers (meso-level);
- certain variations from the normative and cultural-cognitive ‘architecture’ of JP quality practice promoted at macro-meso levels.

These findings support IW theorization that an institution (here JP and its quality practice) is created and sustained via actions (here inter-organizational arrangements and daily work) that are both defined and shaped by elements of institutional complexity, as well as driven by organizational and individual actors’ interests and goals. The case exemplifies how organizations involved in JP, through their daily work and using criteria also ‘defined’ by other social actors (here - EM structures, professional networks, etc.) develop a quality programme featuring JP characteristics and some of the best practices as well as its own specificities.

This case analysis thus also explicates a situated nature of JP quality praxis. The consortium has created its own flexible system of QA in which JP staff are less concerned with detailed descriptions of processes and compilation of those in quality compendiums, rather focusing their attention and energy on changes and improvements that they deem necessary. The agency and reflexivity of SOLO staff is embodied in their chosen approach to programme quality and practices in how the consortium works to alleviate the bureaucratic burden associated with QA processes and, at the same time, to act upon their interests, based on their understanding and interpretation of quality. As the case suggests, on the ground level, in everyday work situations the staff focus on their individual tasks and roles. These are primarily linked with daily activities and core aspects of the programme such as curriculum and research, teaching and learning, administrative and organizational infrastructure, and student support services. Quality-driven activities

in SOLO cover various aspects of the programme (e.g., content-related collaboration, team teaching, programme administration and student support) and include deliberate communication and information sharing practices between and among staff and students. These activities are transformative aspects of quality theorized by Harvey and Green (1993) where the focus is on students' learning and development, their educational gains and career success.

The praxis of quality in this particular setting brings about innovation, programme enhancement, shared understanding among staff as well as increased professionalism (academic, managerial, and administrative). The latter was important to deal with the prescribed evaluation activities (both internal and external). The professionalization that is necessary to secure legitimacy is one of the unintended consequences of quality work also observed in other HE studies (c.f. Stensaker, 2007; 2008). Stensaker argued about the formalisation of quality-related work in the form of written routines and scripts and the people assigned to specific tasks. This formalisation of quality-related work is becoming an accepted and normal part of everyday work.

Practical-evaluative and projective-strategic agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, in section 3.1.1) determined by staff reflexivity and intentional changes and improvements of academic/organizational practices are found to dominate the quality praxis at meso-micro level. The findings show that all partners involved in JP to some extent were pioneering with the EM programme at their institutions. The collaborative (joint) nature of the programme needed a new approach, some new services and procedures, and additional HR resources. Some of these new developments serve as disruptive elements of the existing academic cultures and practices of PIs. For instance, exchange and sharing of information about teaching and research, team-teaching practices facilitated 'opening up' of curriculum matters from a more individualistic approach, teaching from one's own research agenda, to a more transparent and collectively owned curricula; provision of fast, efficient, and 'user-friendly' student support services are treated as a necessary element addressing student needs and contributing to the satisfaction of student experience, and their academic success. Other developments and forms of quality assurance and its practices in SOLO, such as centralized course evaluation tools are an example of taken-for-granted, institutionalized practices that do not specifically address JP quality needs. These have been criticized by micro-level actors as inadequate for JP quality monitoring; nonetheless, they are an established routine in the universities involved. Here, an iterative, habitual type of agency may be

observed. This type of agency is largely unreflexive (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) and is unlikely to lead to quality transformation and enhancement.

JPs and their quality practice may be referred to as a rather ‘young’ institution. The co-creation and maintenance of this practice are the main outcomes of the multi-actor agency in the institutional work that has been observed. Organizational adaptations are taking place at meso-micro levels. As argued above, there are signs that this new institution of JPs and their quality is disrupting some academic and organizational practices of universities involved (e.g., curriculum and student support related matters). Since that was not the focus of this study, it therefore needs further investigation.

#### **7.4. Quality enhancement (RQ.4)**

As it was noted throughout the study, quality enhancement is one of the envisioned outcomes of JPs. In the discourse and practice of JP quality enhancement is constructed as a continuous effort of improvement. Quality enhancement is treated as one of the fundamental activities which, along with internal and external assessment and evaluation practices, contribute to the quality assurance of the programmes. Enhancement activities are follow-up actions targeted at eliminating identified weaknesses of the programme, e.g. adjusting curriculum and teaching methods, and optimizing processes so that various programme elements are fit-for-purpose. The research indicates that excellence and high-quality concepts associated with JPs at macro-meso levels are not necessarily taken-for-granted by JP staff at a micro-level. The study finds that an ongoing and developmental approach to quality is, in fact, utilized at meso-micro levels. This approach is adopted and carried over via actions, interactions, and practices consequently leading to programme enhancements. While this study was not directly looking for a ‘proof’ of quality enhancement, the respondents reported that quality-driven developments were taking place in various elements of the programme and at all levels. They also observed that the consortium-driven joint activities implemented in JP units led to some transfers of practices to other departments, and also to the central levels of partner universities.

Some of the key quality enhancement elements and practices, identified by JP staff, had to do with curriculum coordination and transparency; student profile and engagement; ‘tight’ organization such as student support and communication; and student feedback and availability of data. Interviewees reported that they have been able to update the curriculum and adjust teaching over time; and also implement

new or upgrade existing administrative, organizational quality-related processes and practices. In the human resource area not only personnel changes took place with new additions to departments, but also staff confidence to organize things differently grew, as well as self-esteem in teaching capacity and experimentation with new teaching approaches.

The study found that programme and organizational level improvements took place due to the following factors: external stakeholder requirements (macro-level), inter-organizational cooperation (meso-level), student demands, and staff commitment to make the programme work (micro-level). On the one hand, external demands pressed staff to implement certain practices (e.g., internal evaluation, public information and communication channels, and joint processes), and the consortium put forth policies and strategies to safeguard quality. On the other hand, staff exercised their agency by innovating their practices, exploiting cooperation and partnership to lobby and implement changes at their units and institutions in order to improve the programme and its processes.

## **7.5. Contributions**

This study contributes to two distinct streams of academic literature, 1) higher education and its quality; and 2) institutional work and institutional complexity. Offering a thorough review of the JP nature, its characteristics and developments, this study expands our knowledge about JPs and their quality practice. It contributes to the understanding of JP developments in the EHEA by explicating how this specific form of inter-organizational collaboration, while not massive, attracted considerable attention and engagement of multiple HE actors. Guided by the IW framework, the study contributes to the ongoing debate about quality in HE and how a particular practice (here JPs and their quality) emerges and is reproduced. The study explicates linkages among various HE stakeholders, interactive processes among and within universities as well as between universities and their environment. The study develops an enhanced understanding of the relational and situated nature of JP quality and the role of individual and collective actors in their attempts to collaboratively model quality standards and create an institutional practice. The JP quality framework and practise is embedded in broader EHEA quality developments (such as those relating to European Standards and Guidelines for QA); a specific European approach for external QA of JPs and is grounded in inter-organizational arrangements and everyday activities of JP providers. Quality in the selected JP is interpreted in terms of purpose and its

context (EM, national, inter-organizational, organizational) which resonates with Harvey and William's (2010a) conclusions. Scholars argued that due to the multifaceted and contested nature of quality in HE and also the political undertones of quality, the concept of it must not be detached from purpose and context.

The findings of this study add to the existing IW literature on creating and maintaining institutions, organizational adaptations (cf. Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips, 2002; Orsatto *et al.* 2002; Fox-Wolgramm *et al.* 1998, etc.; Appendix C) and the role of projective-strategic and practical-evaluative agency. The case study findings complement IW studies on how organizational actors cope with and respond to institutional complexity (Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen and Van de Ven, 2009; Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012), the environment where co-existing and interdependent logics prevail due to multiplicity of demands, requirements, and interpretations of quality. IW theorization offers a novel approach to analyse the impact of quality developments as inherently linked to a constitutive nature of quality praxis and emerging institutional logics. Institution (here – JPs and their quality practice) is viewed as located in the sets of practices in which people engage, rather than emerging from those practices and existing at some 'other' (macro) level (Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips, 2002; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Therefore, by studying how organizational members construct solutions to address the issue of quality, what practices they (re)produce, what meanings and intentions they attach to quality-related activities, I was able to connect the effects generated by those activities. Through the analysis of quality-driven activities and developments in a particular JP case, and a close-up examination of organizational actors' everyday work, the interplay among intentionality, actions and outcomes related to quality developments (practices), the study offers a nuanced story of quality-related processes, and the results that these processes bring about.

The EUA studies on JP developments (2004, 2005) find that institutions engaged in this collaborative form of activity indicate the integration of JP processes into their institutions as one of the most challenging issues. In this thesis, both policy makers as well as HE professionals can find the empirical analysis of the case study which expands our knowledge about the complexities involved in JP development and implementation including what may be called a 'novel complexity' of JP integrating into existing organizational structures, academic cultures and how organizational actors choose to deal and cope with those challenges. The findings from the case study expand empirical examples related to mechanisms of organizational adaptation.

This IW study of JPs and their quality practice is carried out across analytical levels (macro, meso, micro). This methodological choice helps to expand our understanding of interactions involved in co-creating and maintaining the institution (JPs and their quality practice). Meso and micro-level developments explicate the role of organizational actors and everyday work of practitioners in the construction and enactment of quality inter-organizationally and locally, consequently contributing to the creation of best practices. These best practices emanating from everyday work formed the basis for the emerging JP quality practice promoted at the macro-meso levels. The methodological choice to carry out the analysis at multiple levels enabled me to observe not only recursivity between the institution (the creation and maintenance of JPs and their quality) and agency of collective and individual actors (as theorized by IW), but also to explicate a recursive relationship among various activities and how actions taken at different levels reinforced each other in the process of IW.

A case incorporated in this study, unlike most case studies in institutional studies research, has embedded units (see Figure 4 in the Appendices). This type of case study is not a common research avenue in either IW or HE quality studies. The setting of the research naturally involves departments spread across multiple organizations in different countries running a JP. Such a setting is quite distinct from cross-national studies of practices in MNCs with parent and host organizations (e.g., Kostova, 1999; Kostova, Roth and Dacin, 2008) everyday work in merging firms situation (Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012) or the inter-organizational collaboration among organizations from different sectors (e.g., Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips, 2002). Nonetheless, it shares the complexity of institutional environment in which organizing occurs. In this study, HEI departments that engaged in a partnership, are embedded in different organizational quality cultures and, respectively, in varied national and supra-national HE environments, the boundaries of which in the context of the EHEA may be dissipating.

## **7.6. Limitations of the study**

This study on IW of JPs and their quality traces JP developments and analyses major quality guiding documents, providing us with emerging contours of JPs and their quality practice. However, a focused study at the actual JP site, albeit with multiple embedded units (EMJP offered by the consortium of five European universities) features one case. While the case reflects organizational adaptations of

the emerging JP practice via daily work and the organizational setup, studying the implementation of a JP at a different site could very likely reveal other findings. The selected case is an EM programme with a particular vision and identity promoted, funded, and closely monitored by EU organizations for adherence and enactment of the vision. Another JP without the EM label may not be necessarily exposed to the same type and level of external pressures such as EM programmes (e.g., the expectation to award joint degrees, integration and jointness of curriculum and processes, regular reporting and close-up monitoring). Variations in external requirements, organizational setup, academic culture and subcultures, and agency of staff could very likely generate a different story of quality-driven developments and their outcomes.

### **7.7. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings**

The findings of this study are potentially beneficial to various HE stakeholder groups which have a vested interest in HE quality issues: e.g., researchers, policy makers, leaders and managers of HEIs, teaching staff, and students. The study illuminates the emergence of JPs and their characteristics including quality matters and practices as a multi-layered, multi-purpose and multi-actor phenomenon. The study explicates the environment of institutional complexity in which JP practice is co-created and maintained by multiple actors. Various HE actors will be able to see the effects generated by agency, particular roles, activities, and interaction that are driven by various goals and interests.

Activities at a macro-level were targeted at the development of common values, principles, standards, and expectations of JPs and their quality practice. Whereas policy work has regulatory power; guidelines, handbooks and manuals produced by professional networks and associations highlight normative orientations and cultural-cognitive frameworks of JP practice. That said, the co-creation and reproduction of JPs and their quality practice take places in daily work at HEIs and in inter-organizational arrangements. The institutional work lenses that this study applied may raise the awareness of practitioners to the role of the external environment, pressures of regulatory apparatus, and the normative and cultural-cognitive framework of JP practice promoted by professional associations and networks. The key message of this thesis for practitioners is that their everyday work, choices they make for how to go about quality, what to focus on, the intentions they attribute to quality practices weave into the tapestry of JP quality and helps to either maintain, create and/or disrupt a current discourse and practice



of JPs and their quality. Staff at a micro-level, through their everyday work, are directly engaged in JP activities. They are the primary ‘watchers, keepers and implementers’ of quality. JP providers (staff and organizations) are also in the frontline of creating ‘best practices’ and either carrying over the norms of those practices (maintaining them) or changing them when they no longer address pertinent issues. Their agency and reflexive practice may lead to adaptations and disruption of institutionalized practices or the creation of new working patterns and practices that address current HE imperatives and challenges.

In this particular JP context, I have observed the contestation around one of the key values and idealized norms of ‘jointness’ in this collaborative form of activity. The findings of this study suggest that joint programmes may have different levels of integration and jointness, and that a workable solution will need to be sought after by JP providers in the midst of varied requirements, demands, interests, agendas, and understandings of a quality programme. I have also observed complex organizational structures with local institutionalized quality practices (e.g., centralized evaluations) that may not necessarily be the most efficient and effective in ensuring quality of specialized HE activities. Different HE activities may need a specialized quality enhancement approach that takes into account the specificities related to their context, aims, nature, and envisioned outcomes of those activities.

### **7.8. Ideas for further research**

Research avenues on institutional outcomes related to the concept of quality and its practice can be extended to other contexts, either JPs or different forms of HE activities. Other case studies of JPs could be carried out, for example, focusing on programmes in different fields of studies or cycles such as Bachelor or Doctoral programmes or JPs outside the EHEA. The study could extend to other forms and contexts of collaborative HE activities, e.g., changing from the current programme level to the institutional level such as the recent developments around the concept of “European Universities.” Further studies could also be carried out on HE developments in other parts of the world tracing initiatives of HE stakeholders that emanate from quality concerns and rising HE standards nationally and in the context of global competition. The transnational environment of institutional complexity and variations in HEIs’ responses to the complexities, forms of agencies and their impact on academic/organizational culture and practices including quality culture could be investigated.

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## IX. APPENDICES

### Appendix A. Abbreviations and acronyms

BFUG	Bologna Follow-Up Group
CEE	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies
CIDD	Consortium for International Double Degrees
EU Council	Council of the European Union
DG EAC	Directorate-General for Education and Culture
DG DEVCO	Directorate-General International Cooperation and Development
EACEA	Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency
EAQAJP	European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes
EC	European Commission
ECA	European Consortium for Accreditation
EUCO	European Council
ECTNA	European Chemistry and Chemical Engineering Education Network
EFQM	European Foundation for Quality Management model
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EM	Erasmus Mundus
EMQA	Erasmus Mundus Quality Assessment
ENAE	European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EP	European Parliament
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

ESIB	National Unions of Students in Europe (current ESU)
ESU	European Students' Union
EU	The European Union
EUA	European University Association
EURASHE	European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HERODOT	Network for Geography in Higher Education
JOIMAN	Joint Degree Management and Administration Network
JOI.CON	Joint Programme Management – Conferences and Training
IW	Institutional Work
JP	Joint (Degree) Programme
NS	National Structures
PI	Partner Institution
QA	Quality Assurance
QE	Quality Enhancement
QI	Quality Improvement
TQM	Total Quality Management

## Appendix B: Quality in higher education concepts and their linkage to practices

Quality can be viewed as	Definition	Examples of Quality Practices
<b>Exceptional</b>	A traditional concept linked to the idea of 'excellence', usually operationalized as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed.	Standards monitoring Research assessment Teacher assessment Performance indicators Accreditation
<b>Perfection or Consistency</b>	Focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time.	Standards monitoring Participant/user feedback External QM Certification Accreditation
<b>Fitness for purpose</b>	Judges quality in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) institution-defined to reflect institutional mission (or course objectives).	Standards monitoring Assessment Customer surveys Institutional accountability audit Accreditation
<b>Value for money</b>	Assesses quality in terms of return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of the value-for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services, including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly, students are also considering their own investment in higher education in value-for-money terms.	Performance indicators Graduate feedback Customer surveys Institutional accountability audit
<b>Transformation</b>	Sees quality as a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education: enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer.	Value-added and its indicators Participant feedback Assessment Improvement audit Accreditation External examination

Source: Harvey (2009)



**Table B-2. Dimensions of quality**

Dimension	Variables	Some Predictors/ Indicators
<p><b>Presage</b></p> <p>-the context before students start learning; presage variables often frame, enable or constrain the form education takes (the process)</p>	<p>Funding</p> <p>Learning resources</p> <p>Student/staff ratio (SSR)</p> <p>The nature of the research enterprise / research performance</p> <p>The degree of student selectivity</p> <p>The quality of the students</p> <p>The quality of the academic staff</p>	<p>Predicts cohort / class size</p> <p>Predicts student study effort</p> <p>Offers an opportunity to arrange educational practices</p> <p>Predicts /affects student performance</p>
<p><b>Process</b></p> <p>-what goes on as students learn, in teaching and learning environment</p>	<p>Pedagogical practices that engender student engagement</p> <p>Class size</p> <p>The amount of class contact/study hours</p> <p>Approach to studying</p> <p>The level of student effort and engagement</p> <p>Quantity, quality and timeliness of feedback to students</p> <p>The extent to which teaching is valued, talked about and developed</p> <p>Quality of teaching</p> <p>Research environment</p> <p>Level of curriculum</p> <p>Reputation /Peer ratings</p> <p>Student Support</p> <p>Quality enhancement processes</p>	<p>Use of resources</p> <p>Predicts student performance</p> <p>Close contact with students/faculty feedback to students may enhance educational outcomes</p> <p>(difficult to quantify)</p> <p>(enables an institution to have highly selective students)</p>
<p><b>Product</b></p> <p>-outcomes of students' learning</p>	<p>Student performance / Samples of student work (e.g. projects, dissertations, etc.)</p> <p>Retention (social and academic integration)</p> <p>Employability</p> <p>Generic outcomes (e.g. student's ability to solve problems)</p> <p>Educational gain</p>	<p>Measures: grades</p> <p>Students as a good predictor of products</p>

Sources: (Biggs, 1993; Gibbs, 2010)

## Appendix C. Institutional work forms, types of actions and their outcomes

Form of IW / Types of actions, practices and strategies	Outcomes/actors
<p><b>CREATING</b></p> <p><i>1. Political work:</i> reconstructed rules, property rights, boundaries that define access to material resources through:</p> <p>a. <i>'advocacy'</i> - the mobilization of political and regulatory support through direct and deliberate techniques of social suasion (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Galvin, 2002)</p> <p>b. <i>'vesting'</i> - the creation of rule structures that confer property rights (Russo, 2001)</p> <p>c. <i>'defining'</i> - the construction of a rule system that confers status, identity, define boundaries of membership or create status and hierarchies within a field (Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal and James, 1998).</p> <p><i>2. Belief systems</i> reconfigured through:</p> <p>a. <i>'constructing identities'</i> - defining the relationship between an actor and the field in which that actor operates (Lounsbury, 2001; Oakes, Townley and Cooper, 1998)</p> <p>b. <i>'changing normative associations'</i> - re-making the connections between sets of practices and normative the moral and cultural foundations for those practices (Townley, 1997; Zilber, 2002)</p> <p>c. <i>'constructing normative networks'</i> - constructing interorganizational connections through which practices become normatively sanctioned and which form the relevant peer group with respect to compliance, monitoring and evaluation (Lawrence <i>et al.</i>, 2002; Orssatto <i>et al.</i>, 2002).</p> <p><i>3. Changing abstracted categorizations</i> to alter the <i>boundaries of meaning</i> through:</p> <p>a. <i>'mimicry'</i> - associating new practices with existing sets of taken-for-granted practices, technologies and rules in order to ease adoption (Hargadon and Douglas, 2001; Jones, 2001)</p> <p>b. <i>'theorizing'</i> - the development and specification of abstract categories, and the elaboration of chains of cause and effect (the process whereby organizational failings are conceptualized and linked to potential solutions (Kitchener, 2002; Orsato, Den Hond and Clegg, 2002)</p> <p>c. <i>'educating'</i> actors in skills and knowledge necessary to support the new institution (Lounsbury, 2001; Woywode, 2002).</p> <p><i>4. Institutional conversion</i> – “redirected to new goals, functions or purposes”, (Dodds and Kodate, 2012) through:</p> <p>a. Exogenous processes: <i>power coalitions</i></p> <p>b. Endogenous processes: <i>leadership and internal stability</i> (internal organizational /political dynamics) (Mahoney and Thelen, 2009; Streeck and Thelen, 2005)</p> <p><i>5. Reorienting the normative network</i> through:</p> <p>a. <i>situated improvising</i></p> <p>b. <i>unobtrusive embedding</i> (Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012)</p> <p><i>6. Institutional entrepreneurship</i> (Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008):</p> <p>a. <i>produce new structures, practices, or regimes</i> (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Garud, Jain and Kumaraswamy, 2002; Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004)</p> <p>b. <i>social transformations that spawn new logics</i> (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Thornton, 2002)</p> <p>c. <i>the widespread adoption of innovation affecting a new normative order or taken-for-granted status quo</i> (Hinings and Greenwood, 1988; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983).</p>	<p><b>CHANGE/TRANSFORMATION</b></p> <p><b>Outcomes:</b></p> <p>Original and new institutions Institutionalized rules, practices and technologies that complement and parallel existing institutionalized arrangements</p> <p><b>Actors:</b></p> <p>Both large established with central positions in the organizational field as well as smaller, less powerful and more marginal actors in the periphery of the field (see Table 1b.)</p> <p>Note: Actions depend on the enabling/constraining individual, organizational, field-level conditions (see Table C-2)</p> <p><b>5. Practice-driven institutional change, shift in field-level logic. Not strategic change, but not entirely unintentional either (Smets <i>et al.</i>, 2012, p. 893).</b></p>

<p>7. Movements that perpetuate self-reinforcing process of institutionalization and institutional change (Seo and Creed, 2002):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'<i>social construction</i>' or social interactions reproduces institutions</li> <li>'<i>totality</i>' produces multilevel, but incompatible institutional processes</li> <li>'<i>contradiction</i>' produces tensions and conflicts (inefficiency, nonadaptability; interinstitutional incompatibilities and misaligned interests)</li> <li>'<i>praxis</i>' produces new social interactions.</li> </ol> <p>8. Alteration of a social mechanism or parts of it (e.g., praxis, practices, agents, social structure) (Sminia, 2011, p. 1581).</p> <p>9. <i>Professional project</i> as an endogenous mechanism (Suddaby and Viale, 2011).</p>	<p>7. Institutionalization and institutional change</p>
<p><b>MAINTAINING</b></p> <p>1. Adherence to rules systems Coercive dimension – compliance with existing rules through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'<i>enabling</i>' - creating of rules that facilitate, supplement and support institutions such as the creation of authorizing agents or diverting resources (Leblebici <i>et al.</i>, 1991)</li> <li>'<i>policing</i>' - ensures compliance through enforcement, auditing and monitoring (Fox-Wolfgramm <i>et al.</i>, 1998; (Schuler, 1996)</li> <li>'<i>detering</i>' - threat of coercion to inculcate the conscious obedience of institutional actors (Townley, 2002).</li> </ol> <p>2. Reproducing existing norms and belief systems Normative dimension - promotes the institutional norms and belief systems, through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'<i>valorizing/demonizing</i>' - providing positive and negative examples that illustrate the normative foundations of an institution (Angus, 1993)</li> <li>'<i>mythologizing</i>' – preserving the normative underpinnings of an institution by creating and sustaining myths regarding its history (mythologizing one's history) (<i>ibid.</i>)</li> <li>'<i>embedding and routinizing</i>' - infusing the normative foundations of an institution into the participants' day-to-day routines and organizational practices (Townley, 1997; Zilber, 2002).</li> </ol> <p>3. Perpetuating coexistence of competing ideologies by negotiating the relationship between local institutions and broader systems of meaning (Zilber, 2009) sustaining legitimacy with narratives reinforced by meta-narratives.</p> <p>4. Appealing to multiple constituencies with multiple institutional logics, (Trank and Washington, 2009) on AACSB accreditation and business schools, how AACSB managed competing demands.</p> <p>5. 'Decoupling' of practices from their formal and espoused structure (e.g., Hirsch &amp; Bermiss, 2009).</p> <p>6. Combining competing logics in innovative ways (Jarzabkowski <i>et al.</i> 2009).</p> <p>7. Social mechanism: 'repairing and concealing' to address contradictions (Schildt <i>et al.</i> 2011) (see below), Sminia (2011) through enactment of practices.</p> <p>8. Power dynamics of professional elites – professional elites exercising power in pursuit of institutional maintenance and protection of privileged position (Currie <i>et al.</i>, 2012); (professional jurisdiction; hierarchy; power).</p> <p>9. Maintenance of institutional multiplicity and field boundaries (Zilber, 2011).</p>	<p><b>STABILITY / CONTINUITY / STATUS QUO</b></p> <p>Actors whose work is to maintain:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>actors who are highly aware of what they are doing and of the purpose and the influence that their work has on the maintenance of the institution</li> <li>actors engaged seem less 'aware of the purpose and the influence that their work has on the maintenance of the institution</li> </ol>

<p>10. Coping with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. the entrance of new members into the organization or the field</li> <li>b. the evolution of the field in new and unexpected directions</li> <li>c. changes in pan-institutional factors such as technology and demographics (in Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).</li> </ul>	
<p><b>DISRUPTING</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Disconnecting sanctions - state and non-state actors work through state apparatus to disconnect rewards and sanctions from sets of practices, technologies or rules (Jones, 2001; Leblebici <i>et al.</i>, 1991)</li> <li>2. Disassociating moral foundations - disassociating the practice, rule or technology from its moral foundation as appropriate within a specific cultural context (Ahmadjian and Robinson, 2001)</li> <li>3. Undermining core assumptions and beliefs - decreasing the perceived risks of innovation and differentiation by undermining core assumptions (Leblebici <i>et al.</i>, 1991; Wicks, 2001)</li> <li>4. Acquisition of power through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <i>shifting from normative to coercive strategies</i></li> <li>b. <i>making concessions to multiple logics and stakeholders</i></li> <li>c. <i>adjusting to stakeholder and regulator expectations</i> (Rojas F., 2010)</li> </ul> </li> <li>5. Influence over control mechanisms, e.g., professional associations, regulatory agencies, the courts (e.g., Dezalay and Garth, 1995; Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings, 2002; Jones, 2001).</li> <li>6. Collective organizing, connection to elites, developing a language for reflection and action, and remaining grounded in one's own life experience (Lykes, Blanche and Hamber, 2003).</li> <li>7. Outsider driven deinstitutionalization of a practice through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <i>'translation'</i> - "an interaction that involves negotiation between various parties, and the reshaping of what is finally being transmitted" (Zilber, 2006, p. 283)..., the negotiation of shared meanings that make particular practices...illegitimate (Oliver, 1992)" (Maguire and Hardy, 2009, p. 149).</li> <li>b. <i>'organizational discourse'</i></li> </ul> </li> </ol>	<p><b>DE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION</b></p> <p>Aiming at "redefining, recategorizing, reconfiguring, abstracting, problematizing and, generally, manipulating the social and symbolic boundaries that constitute institutions" (Lawrence &amp; Suddaby, 2006, p. 238).</p> <p>Erosion or discontinuity (Oliver, 1992)</p> <p>6. note: participatory action approach</p>
<p><b>CROSSING CATEGORIES OF CREATING AND MAINTAINING INSTITUTIONS</b></p> <p>Theorizing', 'defining', 'educating', 'constructing normative networks', 'policing'; 'embedding and routinizing' (Currie <i>et al.</i>, 2012) – the reaction of organizational actors to policy driven change.</p> <p>Change and maintenance (analysis of rhetoric and media related to financial crisis): actors' positions (status quo, neutral, change) depends on the <i>role</i> of the actor (Riaz, Buchanan and Bapuji, 2011)</p> <p>Change and stabilization of practices (Gherardi and Perrotta, 2011) through the processes of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>g. <i>'limitation'</i> - the coercive force that sustains the new practice also defines its constitutive rules and delimits the field of legitimate action (what can or cannot be done)</li> <li>h. <i>'rhetorical closure'</i> - defining the categories of the new practices which stabilizes not only their meaning but also the field of legitimate action. It is at the institutional level that a unequivocal answer is given, the negotiation between science and politics is rhetorically closed</li> <li>i. <i>'anchoring in technology'</i> - The technology of a practice therefore changes when the context of the practice is redefined in its constitutive rules and stabilization of the new practice is inscribed in the materiality of doing.</li> </ul>	<p>Inter-professional and intra-professional stratification (also Freidson, 1988)</p> <p>Constrained more radical change</p>

**Table C-2. Heterogeneous agency, its enabling and constraining conditions**

Actors	Individual	Organizational	Field	Activities, actions, strategies
<p>Various actors:</p> <p>Individuals</p> <p>Organizations</p> <p>Communities</p>	<p>Power</p> <p>Reputation</p> <p>Social networks (intra and inter-organizational)</p> <p>Status</p> <p>Control (e.g. of resources)</p> <p>Interests</p> <p>Role of the actor – position towards change and maintenance (e.g. status quo, neutral, change)</p>		<p>Policies (e.g., power granting) – also organizational</p>	<p>Rhetorics (rhetoric and argumentation strategies; rhetorical and political struggles of leadership)</p> <p>Professional project</p> <p>Relying on networks</p> <p>Power exercise (e.g., gaining resources)</p> <p>Alliances (forming, mobilizing alliances through cultural codes, discourse and political skills)</p>
<p>Leaders of institutions (Kraatz and Moore, 2002; Kraatz, 2009)</p> <p>Community organizers (Hargrave and van de Ven, 2009)</p> <p>Marginal groups (Mair and Marti, 2009)</p> <p>Elite: industry executives, high-profile academics and regulators (Riaz <i>et al.</i>, 2011)</p> <p>Professionals (Currie <i>et al.</i>, 2012)</p>	<p>Formal / informal office</p> <p>Skill (e.g., technical, social, political)</p> <p>‘Cultural competence’</p> <p>Expertise</p> <p>Visionaries</p> <p>Charisma</p> <p>Reflexivity</p>	<p>Social capital</p> <p>Social position (e.g., status)</p> <p>Motivation</p> <p>Certain behaviours</p> <p>Resources (e.g., financial, symbolic)</p> <p>Authority over knowledge, power</p> <p>Heterogeneity, multiplicity, ambiguity</p>	<p>Inconsistencies in social structure</p> <p>Reasonability</p> <p>Exogenous shocks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Shifts in social values</li> <li>▪ Regulatory policies</li> <li>▪ Technological regimes</li> </ul> <p>Coercive pressure and symbolic violence</p> <p>Fragmentation and contradictions</p> <p>Competing logics</p> <p>Heterogeneity, pluralism</p>	<p>Conformity/selection</p> <p>Transformation (Suchman, 1995)</p> <p>Tolerance seeking (van Dijk <i>et al.</i> 2011)</p> <p>Mobilizing resources /others, creating meaning (Weik, 2011)</p> <p>Symbolic manipulation; value commitments; creating coherence; constructing the meaning, integrity; controlling messages and practices</p> <p>Practices (enabling /enacting practices; specific activities / praxis (‘bodily activities’ and ‘know-how’); particular kinds of strategic practices through ‘repairing and concealing’ contradictions</p> <p>Influence mechanisms</p> <p>Social distribution</p>

Based on Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca (2009) and other conceptual and empirical IW studies

## Appendix D. Data types and sources

Aspect of study/Type of data	Accessed through
<p><u>Field-level (EHEA) JP quality discourse and practice</u></p> <p>Regulatory documents (government policies and regulations, research reports, quasi-governmental regulatory documents) HEIs networks/professional associations guidelines), e.g.,:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Official Journal of EU, L340 (2008); L345 (2003)</li> <li>▪ European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area</li> <li>▪ Guidelines for Quality Enhancement in European Joint Master Programmes</li> <li>▪ Guide To Developing And Running Joint Programmes at Bachelor And Master’s Level (Including a Template)</li> <li>▪ Handbook of quality. Support services related to the Quality of ERASMUS MUNDUS Master Courses and the preparation of quality guidelines</li> <li>▪ Secondary data (research reports, presentations), e.g., Erasmus Mundus programme evaluation reports, research on JPs; Bologna follow-up reports, etc.</li> </ul>	<p>Databases, public domain, websites, e.g.,:</p> <p>European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).  <a href="http://www.eqar.eu/">http://www.eqar.eu/</a></p> <p>Euro-lex: <a href="http://eur-lex.europa.eu/en/index.htm">http://eur-lex.europa.eu/en/index.htm</a></p> <p>ENQA <a href="http://www.enqa.eu">http://www.enqa.eu</a></p> <p>EUA  <a href="https://www.eua.eu/resources/publications/658:guidelines-or-quality-enhancement-in-european-joint-master-programmes.html">https://www.eua.eu/resources/publications/658:guidelines-or-quality-enhancement-in-european-joint-master-programmes.html</a></p> <p>Networks, e.g.,: Joint Degree Management and Administration; Consortium of Joint and Double Degrees):  <a href="https://www.joiman.eu/default.aspx">https://www.joiman.eu/default.aspx</a></p> <p><a href="http://www.ecahe.eu/w/index.php/EQA">http://www.ecahe.eu/w/index.php/EQA</a></p>
<p><u>A selected JP quality notion and activities</u></p> <p>Internal JP documents, e.g.,:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ JP agreement, joint quality statement, minutes, description of quality tools and procedures, etc.</li> <li>▪ Observations</li> <li>▪ Semi-structured interviews</li> <li>▪ Informal conversations and exchange of electronic messages</li> </ul>	<p>JP website; visits to partner institutions, elements of a study programme (Summer School); in person and e-meetings with JP consortium leaders and selected JP staff members</p>

## **Appendix E. Provisional set of questions guiding data collection and analysis**

1. *What is the formal discourse/quality guiding logic in relation to JPs (field level)?:*
  - 1a. How quality of JP is constructed in policy/professional networks' and/or associations' documents?
  - 1b. What is the meaning and significance of quality? (e.g., concepts used, aims, recommended / prescribed activities, norms, values, rules and mores guiding those activities, any best practices)?
2. *How is the issue of quality addressed among organizational members engaged in a selected JP (inter-organizational level)?:*
  - 2a. Is there a common quality framework, e.g. a joint quality strategy? If so,
  - 2b. How is quality strategy of JP developed? (Jointly within the consortium/By individual institution/by the coordinating institution) / Who/what has been consulted (e.g., current organizational practice, regulative documents, some standards, etc.)
3. What are the dimensions of quality? (e.g., quality of teaching (pedagogic quality)/research, quality of support services and physical facilities)
4. What organizational activities are considered to be contributing to internal quality developments? (What is being done/has been done/is planned to be done - any tools, procedures?)
5. What are the intentions/goals of quality strategy and associated activities? (e.g., assurance, compliance, monitoring and control, enhancement, other?)
6. What values are guiding quality driven activities? (e.g., value for money (efficiency), market (competitiveness), student learning and transformation)
7. What are anticipated outcomes of the processes in place?
8. How were quality procedures and tools developed? (Have separate/new processes and tools been designed and implemented or have the existing quality tools a partner institution(s) been adopted / based on some best practice?)
9. Are quality developments guided by particular legislation, guidelines, standards, current organizational structures or practices?
10. Has the relevance of Q tools and other activities in terms of means and ends been discussed? (Do the existing quality practices serve the purpose?)
11. Do those activities contribute to quality enhancement?

## Appendix F. Coding categories and elements of the study

The initial phase of empirical data coding included the following main elements

What to code?	Elements of the study
Specific interactions, actions, activities, strategies, tools related to quality of a JP (what actors do and say)	Praxis (Jun 1998; Seo & Creed 2002) <i>- critical, conscious, socially purposive, political action</i>
Who is engaged in quality driven activities?	Actors <i>-individual and collective</i>
Enabling and constraining conditions underlying quality-driven activities and practices (either internal or external, e.g. decision-making structures or novel complexity)	Enablers and constraints
Meanings and significance of quality (concepts used, norms, rules, values, mores guiding quality related activities, established procedures perceived as obligatory)	Institutional quality frameworks Situated meanings
How explicitly quality is described in the documents/ among actors?	Shared understandings
How multiplicity of demands/contradictions addressed?	Institutional complexity
Underlying goals of quality related activities (what is planned to achieve and how?)	Intentions/Goals/Motivation
Are actors questioning the relevance of practices in terms of means and ends, and underlying assumptions? (what is best in the case of a project at hand)?	Reflexivity/Interests
Have they thought of the outcome/impact of quality practices? Any secondary consequences?	Reflexivity/Outcomes
Do participating organizations (JP personnel) review how quality is addressed, whether certain practice/process revisions and changes are needed?	Reflexivity



## Appendix G. Erasmus Mundus quality practice

Erasmus Mundus Quality Assessment 2008-2012

Handbook of Quality 2008 / *Handbook of Excellence 2012*<sup>17</sup>

### **FLAF – Facilities | Logistics | Finance**

- Efficient and effective (consistent) communication and consulting about the course with students (student feedback: course evaluations, the effectiveness of support, etc.); channels of communication relevant to student needs
- Selecting the right students (best, competent, with particular and legitimate qualifications)
- Providing support to admitted students with visas, travel, accommodation, cultural immersion, induction on academic practices of European universities, etc.)
- Internships and placements as an additional enriching learning experience and a key attractor
- Finance allocation on the basis of academic needs and priorities of the course
- Demonstrable outcomes to enhance learning and teaching environment
- Alumni engagement in the development of the course and benefit of students in the programme

### **QUIL – Quality of Leadership Among Institutions** ('highest' quality students and staff)

- Delivering value to excellent students that leads to their successful career paths
- Research and teaching excellence of staff who are able to work across institutional and cultural boundaries
- Leadership qualities of key personnel, intellectual leadership, formal support through recognition and reward
- Creating and marketing course identity (high quality Is and staff, relevant and robust content)
- Securing institutional commitment for sustainability through strategic value to Is, embeddedness in university structures, fit to learning, teaching and research strategies
- Delivering highest quality of learning and teaching to third country students ('world-class' resources, 'real-world' applications, 'high standards' of support)
- Financial sustainability (diverse sources)

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<sup>17</sup> 2008 handbook information in the table is provided in regular font, 2012 handbook information is in italic font.

### **QATL – Quality of Teaching and Learning**

- Excellent curriculum, and integrated programme with sufficient flexibility to respect institutional priorities and institutional differences, plan for variations in staff availability (clear structure, no duplication of content, explicit teaching and learning objectives at all levels(department to Institution) and expected outcomes, continuity in learning experience (course progression, course materials, teaching and learning activities aligned with course objectives and outcomes), a regular system of external programme review and quality control
- Student and alumni review of the course design
- Preparing students for ethical standards and cultural practices, learning standards and practices (e.g., writing styles, plagiarism, presentation techniques, bibliographic management tools, language training)

### **JUPI – Joined-up Practice and Integration**

- Joined processes for marketing, student recruitment, information sharing, communication to students, attractive scholarship scheme, division of labour and finance among partner Is, consistency and clarity in pedagogy, student workload, student working practices, teaching practice and support
- Quality assessment of course content and teaching (through structured student feedback), review, harmonisation and follow-up actions. Internal review focused on doing things better, more efficiently, ensuring that the value is delivered to beneficiaries (students)
- Agreed upon procedures and practices to balance performance expectations and performance management with individual institutional practices, authority and independence of partner Is

### ***A course vision***

- *Objectives are documented, niche market, content contemporary and relevant, multidisciplinary, valued to all stakeholders, European and global ‘added value’, economic and societal value, shared academic cultures, mobility value, employability prospects, degree recognition*

### ***Learning, Teaching and Staff Development Strategy***

- *Pedagogy fit for purpose (meets objectives, connected to outcomes); student workload distribution and assessment equitable; provision of learning tools, facilities, programme review and ongoing development; staff inter-cultural awareness and mobility opportunities*

### ***Strategies for***

- *Human resources; Finances; Communication and Administration; Management; Internationalization; Marketing, Quality Assurance*

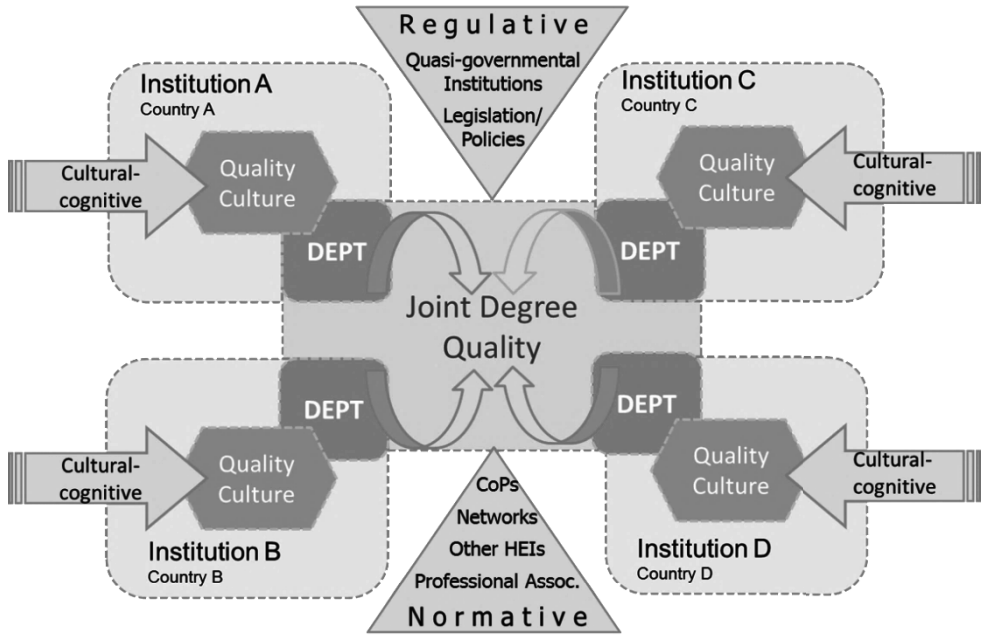
**Key words:** *realistic strategy, coherent and comprehensive, sustainable, robust, transparent, formalized partnership, strong commitment, coordinated, integrated, efficiency and effectiveness, jointness, embedded, benchmarking*

## Appendix H. Actors and their roles

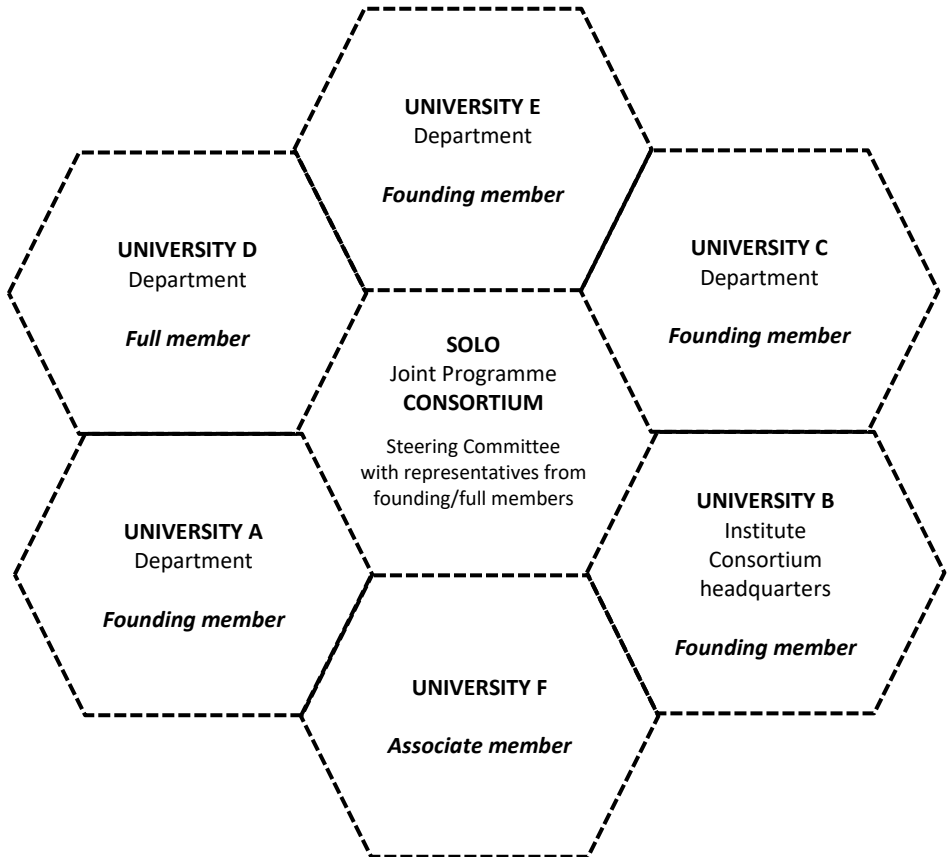
Lev.	Actor	Role	Instrument
<b>MACRO</b>	<b>EU institutions</b>		
	EP and EU Council	Setting aims and objectives, standards, rules, and procedures	Policy, establishment of the EM programme
	EM unit of DG EAC of the EC DG DEVCO	Strategic management of the EM Ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the EM Transparency of implementation	Evaluation of the programme Recommendations for further implementation Development of guidelines, indicators, best practices re EM management & administration
	EACEA	Management and administration Selection of projects Collecting data Monitoring Regulating/Prescribing	Application calls Reports from beneficiaries Ad-hoc surveys of EM students and alumni Evaluation of EM programmes Publicity means, e.g., programme website
	<b>HEIs and their networks</b>		
	HEIs Networks Consortiums Associations	Sharing best practices Knowledge transfer Improving/developing the teaching	Best practice manuals, quality guidelines Training of staff involved in JP projects Conferences, annual events Websites, publications
	<b>Member States</b>		
	National and/or federal	HE/study programme legal base Requirements and regulations Reforming HE to align to EU Promoting university autonomy	Provisions for joint degrees Tuition fees Study programme regulations Three cycle study programme structure Student feedback, alumni monitoring Accountability for funded programmes Accreditation structures
	National Structures	Promoting awareness among HEIs about JPs including EM Ad-hoc support to institutions involved in EM	

Lev.	Actor	Role	Instrument
<b>MESO</b>	<b>Consortium</b>		
		Steering the curriculum, innovations and development; quality related Qs & discussions Accountability to the EM structures	Discussions at W/S schools, forums Faculty issues (ad hoc) Setting forward looking agenda, initiating discussions and changes/follow-up Reports to the EM structures
	<b>Partner Institutions</b>		
	University authorities	Support for starting a programme Endorsement of inter-organizational arrangements	Programme approval (e.g., Senate (A)) Awareness of faculty needs and new programme developments (A) Interaction between JP unit and central administration (A)
	Central offices, e.g., International Office, QA units	Support for the programme Centralized requirements Evaluation instruments & processes of reviewing feedback Ideas and suggestions for QA HR development	University QA standards & internal strategies Institutional policy (E) Programme evaluation/ report reviews (B) Issuing degrees (Study Service Centre, A) Thesis requirements Study Conference (A), Student surveys Enrolment decisions (D) Faculty hires (A) Teacher training and coaching (B)
Academic departments running the JP	Support for starting and running a programme	Programme development Setting course specific learning outcomes Proposals to the Consortium	
<b>MICRO</b>	<b>Staff</b>		
	Individual JP staff	For specific roles and responsibilities see sections 6.1.2-6.1.3.	Setting up inter-organizational arrangements among PIs of the consortium Everyday work

Figure 4. Sample case illustration



**Figure 5. SOLO consortium structure**



## ABSTRACT

The dissertation explores the dynamics of quality-related developments in transnational higher education. The aim is to develop an enhanced understanding of the relational and situated nature of higher education (HE) quality and its practices by examining how quality in cross-border collaborative arrangements, such as joint programmes (JPs), is constructed, enacted, and with what institutional outcomes. Through the focus on praxis (Jun, 1998), i.e. critical, conscious and socially purposive actions of individual and collective actors, I illuminate the role of agency in advancing and/or maintaining a particular approach to dealing with the issue of quality in HE.

A theoretical framework for this study is drawn from the current strand of scholarship in Institutional Work (IW) (Lawrence *et al.*, 2008, 2011). The IW perspective builds on the tenets of institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2008b) and the sociology of practice (Bourdieu 1977; 1993; de Certeau 1994; Giddens 1984; Lave and Wenger 1991). Specifically, it shifts the attention from structures and the view of linear institutional change and maintenance, primarily driven by field-level institutional pressures to the recursive relationship of agency and institutions, and, in particular to the actors' agency, their daily interactions and actions.

Joint programme developments, the emergence of its quality discourse and practice are analyzed through the lenses of narrative discourse of inquiry into social experience. A multi-level (Jepperson and Meyer, 2011) study is carried out based on a combination of research methods and data sources. Synthesis of available literature and document analysis have been undertaken to trace major developments of JPs and their quality at a macro level. To study organizational and daily work setting, a single, real-time, qualitative case with embedded units (Stake, 1995) spread across five institutions in multiple countries has been conducted. Twenty- one semi-structured interviews with selected JP staff members were complemented with observational field notes and (inter)organizational documentary data about the JP and its quality-related activities. Combining the analysis of data drawn from multiple levels (Jepperson and Meyer, 2011) enabled the study of idiosyncratic professional activities embedded in the environment of institutional complexity. Attention has been paid to the interplay among actors' intentions regarding JPs and their quality-driven activities, actions taken and expected outcomes.

This research offers an empirical account on how IW is accomplished in transnational HE. JPs and their quality practice in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are found to be a multi-actor, multi-layered, and multi-purpose phenomenon. Due to the multi-layered nature of the phenomenon, the praxis of JP quality is relational. It is an interaction of processes, events and activities taking place in policy (macro level), among and within HE institutions (meso level), and through daily work (micro level). The findings of this study indicate that activities taking place at those levels reinforce each other in the IW of co-creating and maintaining the institutionalized practice of JPs and their quality. The study finds that JPs and their quality practice is constructed by key higher education stakeholders and their intermediary organizations and enacted via inter-organizational arrangements of JP provider institutions and their everyday work. The IW involves a combination of policy work, establishment of networks and associations as well as development of normative frameworks which to a large extent are grounded in organizational ‘best practices’. Quality of JPs is conceptualized as ‘high’, having added value, whereas JP quality practice is tied to the concept of fitness-for-purpose and features a holistic and continuous process of quality assurance that includes assessment, evaluation and enhancement-driven activities. This dominant approach to quality promoted at a macro level is adopted in (inter)organizational and everyday work situations with some variations and specificities. The following key strategies were found to aid organizational adaptation of JP practice: ‘embracing differences’, ‘learning and support from peers’, and ‘developing a shared understanding’.

The contributions of this study are the following. First, the study provides a thorough review of JP developments in the EHEA. Second, a ‘new’ lens of IW is applied to the ‘old’ issue of quality in HE in order to contribute to the ongoing debate of quality and its outcomes on teaching and learning in HE. Third, it contributes to the current scholarly debate on the role of agency in IW through the focus on praxis, situated organizing, and the constitutive nature of praxis and institutional logics. Fourth, a case study with units crossing national and organizational boundaries provided an opportunity to study the inter-organizational collaborative setting, which has not been a common research avenue in IW studies.



## SAMENVATTING

Het proefschrift onderzoekt de dynamiek van ontwikkelingen met betrekking tot kwaliteit(szorg) in transnationaal hoger onderwijs. Het doel is een beter begrip te ontwikkelen van de relationele en gesitueerde aard van de kwaliteit van het hoger onderwijs en de praktijken ervan, door te onderzoeken hoe kwaliteit in grensoverschrijdende samenwerkingsverbanden, in dit geval gezamenlijke opleidingsprogramma's (*joint programmes*, JP's), wordt geconstrueerd en bepaald en met welke institutionele resultaten. Door de focus op praxis (Jun, 1998), d.w.z. kritische, bewuste en doelgerichte acties van individuele en collectieve actoren, belicht ik de rol van keuzevrijheid bij het bevorderen en/of handhaven van kwaliteit in het hoger onderwijs.

Het theoretisch kader voor deze studie is ontleend van *Institutional Work* (Lawrence *et al.*, 2008, 2011). Dit perspectief bouwt voort op de principes van institutionele theorie (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001) en de sociologie van de praktijk (Bourdieu 1977; 1993; de Certeau 1994; Giddens 1984; Lave en Wenger 1991). In dit perspectief verschuift de aandacht van lineaire institutionele verandering en instandhouding, voornamelijk gedreven door institutionele druk op veldniveau, naar de recursieve relatie van *agency* en instituties, met name naar *agency* van actoren en hun dagelijkse (inter)acties.

Het ontwikkelen van gezamenlijke opleidingsprogramma's (JP's), de opkomst van het kwaliteitsdiscours en de praktijk ervan worden geanalyseerd door de lenzen van een narratief discours waarin sociale ervaringen centraal staan. Een onderzoek op verschillende niveaus (Jepperson en Meyer, 2011) wordt uitgevoerd op basis van een combinatie van onderzoeksmethoden en databronnen. Er is een synthese gemaakt van beschikbare literatuur en documentanalyse om belangrijke ontwikkelingen van JP's en hun kwaliteit op macroniveau te traceren. Om de organisatie en de dagelijkse praktijken te bestuderen, is een kwalitatieve gevalsstudie met ingebedde eenheden (Stake, 1995) uitgevoerd, verspreid over vijf instellingen in verschillende landen. Eenentwintig semi-gestructureerde interviews met geselecteerde JP-betrokkenen werden aangevuld met observationele veldnotities en (inter)organisatorische documentaire data over het gezamenlijke opleidingsprogramma en zijn kwaliteitsgerelateerde activiteiten. Het combineren van de analyse van gegevens op verschillende niveaus (Jepperson en Meyer, 2011) maakt een studie mogelijk van idiosyncratische professionele activiteiten ingebed in een omgeving gekenmerkt door institutionele complexiteit. Er is aandacht

besteed aan de wisselwerking tussen de intenties van actoren met betrekking tot het gezamenlijke opleidingsprogramma en hun kwaliteitsgedreven activiteiten, ondernomen acties en verwachte resultaten.

Dit onderzoek biedt een empirisch inzicht in hoe *Institutional Work* wordt bereikt in transnationaal hoger onderwijs. Het gezamenlijke opleidingsprogramma en de kwaliteitspraktijk in de Europese hogeronderwijsruimte (*European Higher Education Area*) blijken fenomenen met verschillende actoren, diverse lagen en uiteenlopende doelen te zijn. Het karakter van de praxis van kwaliteit is relationeel. Het is een interactie van processen, evenementen en activiteiten die plaatsvinden in beleid (macroniveau), tussen en binnen instellingen voor hoger onderwijs (mesoniveau) en in het dagelijks werk (microniveau). De bevindingen van deze studie geven aan dat activiteiten die op die niveaus plaatsvinden, elkaar versterken in het *Institutional Work* perspectief en bijdragen aan het co-creëren en handhaven van de geïnstitutionaliseerde praktijk van een opleidingsprogramma en zijn kwaliteit. De studie constateert dat het opleidingsprogramma en zijn kwaliteitspraktijk worden samengesteld door belangrijke belanghebbenden in het hoger onderwijs en hun intermediaire organisaties en worden vastgesteld via interorganisatorische regelingen van instellingen voor aanbieders van gezamenlijke opleidingsprogramma's en hun dagelijkse werkzaamheden. Het *Institutional Work* perspectief omvat een combinatie van beleidswerk, het opzetten van netwerken en associaties, evenals de ontwikkeling van normatieve kaders die grotendeels gebaseerd zijn op "best practices". Kwaliteit van dit soort opleidingsprogramma's wordt geconceptualiseerd als "hoog", met toegevoegde waarde, terwijl de kwaliteitspraktijk verbonden is met het concept van "fitness-for-purpose" en een holistisch en continu proces van kwaliteitsborging (gekenmerkt door beoordelingen, evaluatie en verbeteringsgestuurde activiteiten). Deze dominante benadering van kwaliteit die op macroniveau wordt bevorderd, wordt in (inter)organisatorische en dagelijkse werksituaties met enkele variaties en specificaties overgenomen. De volgende sleutelstrategieën werden gevonden om de organisatorische aanpassing van de praktijk te helpen: "verschillen omarmen", "leren en ondersteuning van collega's" en "een gedeeld begrip ontwikkelen".

De bijdragen van deze studie zijn de volgende. Ten eerste biedt de studie een grondig overzicht van *joint programme* ontwikkelingen in de EHEA. Ten tweede wordt een 'nieuwe' lens van IW toegepast op de 'oude' kwestie van kwaliteit in het hoger onderwijs om bij te dragen aan het voortdurende debat over kwaliteit en de resultaten daarvan op het gebied van onderwijzen en leren in het hoger onderwijs.

Ten derde draagt het bij aan het huidige wetenschappelijke debat over de rol van *agency* in *Institutional Work* door de focus op praxis, gesitueerd organiseren en het constitutieve karakter van praxis en institutionele logica. Ten vierde bood een gevalstudie met eenheden die nationale en organisatorische grenzen overschrijden, de gelegenheid om de inter-organisatorische samenwerkingsomgeving te bestuderen, wat tot nu toe niet gebruikelijk is geweest in *Institutional Work* studies.