

## EUROPEAN JOINT STUDIES FOR MASTER STUDENTS - LIMITS AND SOLUTIONS

**Daniela ȘOITU<sup>1</sup>, Nicoleta MORON<sup>2</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The new University Alliances, as European flagship projects, promotes joint educational programs, structures, practices, and campuses. In this context, an very unique and innovative joint master program has been proposed by seven universities, under the title of „Lifelong Well-being and Healthy Ageing”. Despite the long-lasting cooperation of the seven universities involved in the alliance, new and multiple challenges have to be overcome when comes to frame a joint academic offer at master level. Data have been collected by documentation, over 500 hours of group work and stakeholders’ consultation. The paper underlines the main challenges, but also identified solutions for most of these limits and barriers. The results may be used as a starting point for other studies, for other initiative, for national and European policies.

**Keywords:** Joint master program; higher education; LIFELINE; EC2U; European approach; lego-like curricula.

### **Resumé**

Les nouvelles alliances universitaires, en tant que projets phares européens, promeuvent des programmes éducatifs communs, des structures, des pratiques et des campus partagés. Dans ce contexte, un programme de master commun très unique et innovant a été proposé par sept universités, sous le titre « Bien-être tout au long de la vie et vieillissement en bonne santé ». Malgré la coopération de longue date des sept universités impliquées dans l’alliance, de nouveaux et multiples défis doivent être surmontés lorsqu’il s’agit d’élaborer une offre académique commune au niveau master. Les données ont été collectées par documentation, plus de 500 heures de travail en groupe et de consultation des parties prenantes. Le document souligne les principaux défis, mais identifie également des solutions pour la plupart de ces limites et obstacles. Les résultats peuvent être utilisés comme point de départ pour d’autres études, pour d’autres initiatives, pour des politiques nationales et européennes.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor PhD, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Carol I 11, 700506, Iași, Romania; e-mail: daniela.soitu@uaic.ro

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor PhD., Department of Sociology and Social Work, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Carol I 11, 700506, Iași, Romania; e-mail: nicoleta.moron@uaic.ro.

**Mots clés:** Master conjoint; l'enseignement supérieur; LIFELINE; EC2U ; Approche européenne; programmes de type lego.

### **Rezumat**

Noile Alianțe Universitare, ca proiecte emblematiche europene, promovează programe educaționale comune, structuri, practici și campusuri comune. În acest context, un program comun de master foarte unic și inovator a fost propus de șapte universități, sub titlul „Starea de bine pe tot parcursul vieții și îmbătrânirea sănătoasă”. În ciuda cooperării de lungă durată a celor șapte universități implicate în alianță, noi și multiple provocări trebuie depășite atunci când vine vorba de încadrarea unei oferte academice comune la nivel de master. Datele au fost colectate prin documentare, peste 500 de ore de lucru în grup și consultarea părților interesate. Lucrarea subliniază principalele provocări, dar a identificat și soluții pentru majoritatea acestor limite și bariere. Rezultatele pot fi folosite ca punct de plecare pentru alte studii, pentru alte inițiative, pentru politici naționale și europene.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Program de master integrat; învățământ superior; LIFELINE; EC2U; abordare europeană; curricula lego.

## **1. Introduction**

A European initiative launched in 2018 under Erasmus type programs raises the most ambitious plans for higher education and universities.<sup>3</sup> It invites to create European campuses, shared structures and governance, shared educational programs and a better cooperation of academic and administrative staff. It invites students to be more mobile, more ambitious, more open to new possible educational offers, to new joint or multilateral programs at bachelor, master and doctoral level.

18 university alliances have been considered valuable for funding in 2019 and other 24 in 2020 for a pilot phase of three years. 17 from the first consortia created under this European University alliances have been approved in 2022 for funding for other four years. The second group of consortia will follow the same steps in 2023, to consolidate the piloted plans and actions in the next four years, until 2027.

The current paper present and analyse the efforts of one of the alliances from the second group to frame and implement one of the ambitious joint program at master level. The master program is entitled: „Lifelong well-being and Healthy Ageing” – with the acronym LIFELINE.<sup>4</sup>

The topic of the master programe reflects the targets and concerns of the third objective of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (known as Agenda 2030): „Ensuring good health and well-being for all of all ages”. The title and content of the master is rear. The program is also innovative by the lego-like curricula, offering to students more opportunities in choosing their study paths.

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<sup>3</sup> See more at: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>

<sup>4</sup> See more at: <https://ec2u.eu/for-students/ec2u-master-programmes/masters-degree-lifeline-lifelong-well-being-and-healthy-ageing/>

The activities related to the new Joint master program (JMD) are parts of the Virtual Institute for Good Health and Well-being (GLADE) developed in the same University Alliance.<sup>5</sup>

The involved universities are seven, coming from France, Finland, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Romania and Spain.

## 2. Concepts

In this paper, we define the concept of joint program in accordance with the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programs* as „an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from EHEA countries and leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree” (2013).

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA) was adopted in 2015 by the ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the aim of facilitating the involvement of EHEA institutions in joint programs by reaching agreed quality standards and without applying additional national criteria. The application of these standards would allow bypassing the limits that national regulations could bring to the process of planning and managing a joint bachelor's or master's program.

Unfortunately, EA is not currently accessible to all European higher education institutions. Only 17 EHEA countries can use EA for all higher education institutions, another 17 cannot use EA within the country, while 13 states allow its use only in certain institutions or impose certain specific conditions. These challenges are encountered by each university involved in the new flagship Erasmus Projects for European University Alliances intending to frame and promote a joint study program. The chosen approach to overcome such difficulties are faced in different ways by each state, university and university alliance.

The national regulations and laws are the most referred ones when it comes to discuss, agree on and build new solutions for a consortia.

## 3. Methodology

This paper is based on both theoretical documentation (Şoitu, 2020; Şoitu, 2021) and personal experience in planning a joint master's program, as well as data collected with the support of consortium members regarding joint program accreditation barriers. The theoretical documentation included the analysis of the national and European normative frameworks, the reports and studies presented by persons with experience in the design of joint programs and the analysis of the internal documents of the consortium (such as the Consortium agreement). Personal experiences are limited to a single master's program among the three included in the EC2U project (European Campus of City-Universities)<sup>6</sup> for which

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<sup>5</sup> See more at: <https://ec2u.eu/virtual-institutes-staff/glade-for-researchers-staff/>

<sup>6</sup> See more at: [www.ec2u.eu](http://www.ec2u.eu)

steps are currently being taken to be accredited as a joint master's program. The data provided by the partner universities during more than 500 hours of group work, synthesized in a joint report<sup>7</sup>, allowed the centralization of the main challenges brought by the imperative harmonization of the various national legislative requirements in the 7 states with the quality standards provided by The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

#### **4. Main limits and solutions identified**

##### **A. European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes**

is not available to all higher education institutions in the consortium.

The European approach is available under certain conditions in 6 of the seven countries, and not available in Italy. Even though the possibility does exist, it is not in practice in Finland and national accreditation is still necessary or compulsory as in Portugal, France, Germany and Spain. From 31 of March, 2021, Romania has set a legal framework for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and a guideline for the use of the European Approach by the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency is under development.

In the 7 countries involved, the process is still ongoing, despite the fact that the representatives of the Ministers responsible for higher education in the 47 countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) who have met in Bucharest, on 26 and 27 April 2012, have agreed in the signed Declaration that:

*« We will allow EQAR-registered agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements. In particular, we will aim to recognise quality assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes. »*

##### **B. National legislative reforms for joint programmes**

The national legislative reforms on the matter last from 2004 (in Italy, DM 270/2004), 2006 with updates (Portugal: DL 74/2006, 24th March, in its current wording, and Romania).

More recent regulations are guiding the accreditation process of joint programmes in France (Order of 22 January 2014), Spain/ Regional level (RD822/2021) and Romania (Governmental Emergency Ordinance no. 22/31 March, 2021).

In Germany the responsibility is at the level of the states, in our case the „State of Thuringia”. In the Thüringer Hochschulgesetz (ThürHG), Thüringer Studienakkreditierungsverordnung (ThürStAkkVO) by the Regional Thuringian Act (10 ThürStAkkVO), European Approach is available only for joint degree in the strict sense - German regulations, for instance, do not use „joint programmes” anymore (formerly used for both joint degree and double degree).

Institutional rules are applied in Finland based on the The Universities Act (558/2009).

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<sup>7</sup> *ibidem*

### **C. National requirements for programme-level quality assurance or accreditation**

National requirements for quality assurance and accreditation are in place in three of the seven states (Portugal, Romania, Italy), while regional requirements are in place in Spain (Castilla y Leon) and Germany (Thuringia). No additional national requirements are in place for the university from Finland.

### **D. Institutional requirements for programme-level quality assurance or accreditation**

All seven universities have institutional regulations for joint programmes. For most of them, these are organisational regulations, but also ruling the course offers and their characteristics in terms of content, course structure, methods of testing knowledge and skills and teaching tools which are submitted to the councils of the faculties concerned and approved by the institution's body responsible for the academic offer. Research thesis and internship are mandatory for the university from Italy.

An institutional document for the joint programmes is mandatory when requesting the European Approach as evaluation of the joint programmes. The partner university from Romania, for instance, have developed and approved (December, 2021) a new Regulation focused on joint / integrated programmes.

For the University from Finland, where the institutional accreditation is in place, there are internal documents such as: *The University Regulation on Studies*, *the document for establishing a new degree programme at the University* and in *The International cooperation in degree education document*.

### **E. Accessing a foreign agency for the accreditation of the master's program**

This possibility is stated for three universities (from Romania, Germany and Finland) in relation to any EQAR recognised agency. For the university from Finland, this is possible, but unnecessary, internal institutional accreditation being in place.

No possibility to ask for accreditation from a foreign agency – other than regional or national Quality Assurance Agency - for Universities from Portugal, Italy, France and Spain - Castilla y Leon region.

### **F. Recognition of accreditation of programs evaluated by a foreign agency**

Recognition may be on specific terms in Germany, on the basis of state rules (ThürStAkrVO): full study programme, not accreditation of single modules. No national recognition is in place in Italy and Spain for the programmes evaluated by a foreign agency.

The National Quality Assurance Agencies from Portugal can integrate the results of assessment and accreditation procedures carried out in the accreditation process. Romanian National Quality Assurance Agency recognises the external

evaluation performed by a recognised EQAR Agency using the European Approach. The University from Finland recognises the external evaluation and accreditation.

**As a result:** *all seven universities had to follow the national rules in relation to the accreditation of the Joint Master Degree LIFELINE:*

- *University of Iasi has applied and received a national recognition for the LIFELINE master programme in English in (December 2020-August 2021). A new process of accreditation for a JOINT / INTEGRATED MASTER PROGRAMME is ongoing, to be made possible by the new legal frames (Emergency Ordinance no. 22 of March 31, 2021) and the Methodology under development by the same Agency.*
- *University from Italy and University from France have positively past the internal university approvals and have received the national accreditation for the Joint Master program in Health (France) and for the Multilateral Master Programme in Health and Welfare (Italy).*
- *University from Portugal has adopted all necessary data collected from the partners in restricted forms/files, with a strict internal and national calendar for the approvals. The application – in English and in Portuguese - is currently under national accreditation process.*
- *University from Spain – Castilla y Leon have passed the internal approvals – with specific documents in Spanish and in English - and received the Regional Recognition of the already accredited Joint Master programs from the other countries (Italy, France, Romania).*

### **G. National regulations on degree structure and ECTS allocation**

JMD Lifeline is a 120 ECTS master programme, being delivered in four semesters. Additionally, in some universities there are *mandatory ECTS* to be obtained for transversal competencies:

- for Languages, as a proof of knowledge of the learning/ teaching language of the programme (universities from Finland, Romania, Italy),
- for the Ethics and academic research (university from Romania),
- for digital skills (university from Italy).

#### **Solutions:**

- *The Ethics and academic research is a compulsory course for all JMD LIFELINE students in the first semester, at the university from Romania;*
- *All students who apply to JMD LIFELINE have to prove a minimal B2 level of English – the language of learning / teaching in the programme.*
- *Digital skills are parts of various courses offered in the second and third semester by the involved universities from Finland, Romania, France and Italy.*

There are countries (Italy) specifying the maximum number of *online courses* for a master degree: it is up to 10 percent from the total for conventional (face to face) programmes and up to 60 percentages for blended programme.

Full online programmes and courses are subject to special regulations in all 7 countries.

The JMD LIFELINE is designed as a face-to-face master programme. However, in crisis situations, such as the Pandemic, specific decisions are made, according to the national rules and the Agreement signed by the legal representatives of the seven universities involved in the EC2U.

### **H. Study credits recognition and additional requirements**

All ECTS from the *JMD LIFELINE* will be recognised by the partner universities (Supplement no. 4 to Consortium Agreement of EC2U). There are however special requirements for ECTS allocated to the master's thesis and for the elective course: three of the universities (from Portugal, France, Spain) have to allocate 30 ECTS for the master thesis – a full semester; three have a range between 15 and 42 (Italy, Germany, Finland) and for one (Romania) there are 10 ECTS above 30 from the last (fourth) semester.

#### ***Solutions:***

For JMD Lifeline, the solution has been identified in giving the opportunity to all students to have their own selection of activities / courses according to the offer of partner universities.

*s.h1. For JMD LIFELINE, the minimum 120 ECTS are needed in order to obtain the master degree. All additional ECTS will be mentioned on the Diploma Supplement, as for any other Erasmus + case when ECTS resulted from study/placement mobility exceeds 120 ECTS.*

*s.h.2. For the universities with 30 ECTS dedicated to the master thesis, usually there are no courses mandatory for the fourth semester; for others (Romania) the students have to obtain 30 credits from the regular courses and practical activities – the past ones being focused on the preparation of the master thesis.*

### **I. Elective courses**

Differences may be found in relation to the proportion of the elective courses. The situation ranges from no mandatory requirements on this matter (universities from: Portugal and Spain) to minimum 5 ECTS (Germany), until 50 percentages for the first year and up to 75 percentages for the second year of study (France). The most specific case is for Italy, the partner university requesting a minimum of 9 ECTS and maximum of 12 ECTS from the elective courses for all four semesters of study.

#### ***Solutions:***

*For JMD Lifeline, the solution has been identified by introducing the optional courses in the first semester, next to the compulsory courses offered by University from Romania for all students enrolled in JMD Lifeline.*

### **J. National regulations for professional practice and internships**

From the 120 ECTS of JMD Lifeline master programme, at least 1 ECTS has to be achieved for professional practice at the university from Italy. The range of professional practice depends, for the other 6 universities by the field of study and the learning outcomes.

As regards internship, it is not mandatory for the partner universities from Portugal, Romania, Spain and Finland. It depends on the study field in Germany and Italy, but a professional experience is compulsory at a master level in France, form a minimum of 2 months to a maximum of 6 months. If the internship exceeds 8 weeks, the intern must be paid.

### **K. Prior learning in inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary context**

In order to apply to JMD LIFELINE Master programme, the applicants must have obtained 180 ECTS from a bachelor's degree.

Often, the students from different fields of study encounter biases in the application process to an interdisciplinary programme. This is because of the prerequisites, such as certain amount of ECTS from specific courses or fields of study (like Biotechnology, in Italy or Health in Finland). The same or related academic field is requested by the partner universities from Germany and Spain. In other situations, a specific field of the bachelor's degree is not mandatory at the moment, for a master program - universities from Portugal and Romania.

Other biases came from administrative rules which make the cross-faculty programmes almost impossible to implement because students are attributed only to one faculty, thus there is no incentive for cross-faculty programmes (national statistical requirements in Germany, for instance).

The inter-, trans- or multidisciplinary academic offer is emergent in our universities. The mandatory link with one field of study, for the accreditation, limits the inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary initiatives for new master programmes.

#### ***Solution:***

*The solution identified for JMD LIFELINE is to offer two tracks: on Health and on Welfare, under the umbrella of 0988 ISCED Code: Multidisciplinary programs in Health and Welfare. The first semester is mandatory in the coordinating university – the partner university from Romania – and for the following three semesters, the accepted students must choose one of the tracks: Health or Welfare. From each of them, a personalised curricula is possible.*

### **L. National regulations for awarding and delivering of joint degrees**

All seven EC2U universities are able, according to the national / regional legislation, to award a joint, double or multiple degree for the master programme.

Participant universities have experiences mainly in offering double degrees. It is possible by „signing of specific protocols that imply the recognition of the training carried out by students in the different institutions” (Portugal) or by



a „partnership agreement concluded between the partner higher education institutions” (Romania, art. 147 para. 5 of the National Education Law no. 1/2011).

In Germany, state of Turingia, the implementation of a new study programme or change of an existing programme requires the following steps: integration into the target and performance agreement with the state (valid for 3 years, ThürHG 48 paragraph 2. 2); operation only after receiving the permission from the Ministry and successful accreditation (§49) - therefore a long-time horizon is needed, beyond a three year project, for new or change of study programmes. In Finland, at least one semester, in addition, is needed (in total, at least two semesters) in case of co-supervision of thesis.

### **M. Concepts of joint/double/multiple degrees**

The joint, double or multiple degree is defined in the national / regional legislation with some exceptions: multiple degree is not clearly defined in the regulations from Spain, Germany, Portugal, Germany.

### **N. Mandatory requirements regarding the diploma**

There are different requirements in the seven countries related to characteristics of the diploma.

#### ***Solutions:***

*The diploma will be granted according to the national / institutional regulation in place at the time of graduation of students, from the universities with JMD LIFELINE accredited and where students have studied at least one semester. The Diploma Supplement in English will accompany the previous mentioned act.*

*A supplementary EC2U Certificate, having the logo of all 7 universities will be awarded to the graduated students.*

### **O. Recognition of study abroad**

The EC2U Universities and their regions / countries, have specific rules for recognising prior diplomas (bachelor degree). Instant or automatic recognition is possible in some cases in Finland and Romania. It is performed at the institutional level (by the universities from Finland, Italy and France) or at the national level, by a National Degree Recognition Centre (Romania).

For the JMD LIFELINE, during the four study semesters, the recognition is agreed by all EC2U partners.

#### ***Solutions:***

*In a special document (the Supplement no. 4 to the EC2U Consortium Agreement, 2021) the partners have agreed on the content and the mobility routes for JMD LIFELINE students using the Lego-like curriculum proposed approach on the two tracks: Health and Welfare and Erasmus Europe rules for founding and recognition.*

*The students will start the first semester at the university from Romania.*

*From the second semester, the students choosing the Welfare track may continue the study at the same university or at the partner university from Finland. For the third semester, s/he may choose between three partner universities from:*

*Germany, Portugal or France. In the last semester (fourth) the student will finish the thesis in any of the seven involved universities.*

*For the students choosing the Health track, the line will be as such: the university from Spain in the second semester, the university from Italy for the third, but any of the seven in the fourth semester.*

#### **P. Employment and working conditions for teaching staff**

In each of the seven countries there are specific employment and working conditions for teaching staff. The most common condition is to have professors and associate professors, having professional recognition and the doctoral thesis in the teaching field, being employed by the partner university. The professionals adds for the last three to five years are also important in some cases.

### **5. Discussion and conclusions**

The process of designing a joint master programme is very challenging, encountering various biases and barriers. Some of challenges appear to be common to other joint program initiatives, as *legislative frameworks* and *accreditation* (Frederiks & de la Carrere, 2013, p. 9; EHEA, 2014, pp. 5-6; Valiulis & Bučinskas, 2016, p. 80; Frontex, 2018; ImpEA, 2018, p. 25). The awarding of a joint diploma is considered as the main challenge of joint programs generated by national legislative differences (Becker, 2020, p. 47). The solution identified for JMD LIFLINE was to grant „Multilateral Master’s Degree Diploma issued by all Consortium Institutions at which the student accomplished the minimum national academic requirements, provided that full accreditation has already taken place. The Diplomas will be issued and registered according to national/local regulations” (Supplement no. 4 Consortium Agreement Section 11, 2021).

There were some particular challenges regarding the LIFELINE master's program that come from:

- The compulsory integration in a field of study, for the accreditation, even for the interdisciplinary master programs.
- The differences of academic offer for the last/fourth semester;
- The needed link with already existing occupations, in a dynamic labour market limiting the expected results from an interdisciplinary academic offer.

However, the most serious issue was the absence of an accepted European approach that force all the partners to use national accreditation with different rules and time. We generated a joint programme, but we were forced to adapt several issues to the national regulations.

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