

Handbook of STARS EU's QA of Learning and Teaching

Milestone 6: Internal Quality Assurance System



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Summary

The STARS EU Handbook for Quality Assurance (QA) of Learning and Teaching provides a unified framework for designing, delivering, and continuously improving joint academic programmes offered by the STARS EU Alliance. Comprising nine universities from Czech Republic, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and also Albania, the Alliance aims to create high-quality, inclusive, and internationally relevant study programmes that align with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) and broader EU educational goals.

The handbook responds to the evolving demands on higher education—greater international mobility, student diversity, and the need for alignment with labour market expectations. It outlines how joint programmes should define learning outcomes, develop curricula, and implement teaching and assessment methods through the principle of constructive alignment. Programmes must ensure that learning activities, assessments, and outcomes are integrated and student-centred, with a focus on real-world applicability and inclusivity.

Programme development follows a structured three-phase process: pre-study (needs analysis and partner selection), plan and proposal (curriculum and strategy design), and final approval (institutional and alliance-level validation). These phases ensure all programmes are grounded in strategic relevance, quality standards, and shared responsibilities across partner institutions.

Inclusivity, accessibility, and mobility are key commitments. Programmes must accommodate diverse learning needs, incorporate physical or virtual mobility opportunities, and reflect the cultural and academic diversity of the Alliance. Student support services—including advising, mental health, and intercultural integration—are considered essential to programme quality.

Quality assurance is embedded through regular monitoring, feedback, and improvement processes. Programmes are evaluated using clearly defined KPIs, stakeholders' input, and internal and external reviews. Transparency is ensured through standardized documentation, reporting, and communication strategies.

The handbook also provides guidance for managing external quality audits and accreditation. It details the self-assessment, peer review, and follow-up steps, aligning with ESG principles and national standards. Accreditation ensures accountability, facilitates recognition across borders, and enhances trust in the Alliance's educational offerings.

Overall, the STARS EU QA Handbook supports member institutions in delivering high-quality, future-ready joint programmes. By combining academic rigor with shared European values and continuous improvement, the Alliance contributes to a more integrated, inclusive, and innovative higher education landscape in Europe.

Introduction

Higher education has been marked by significant changes that have particularly impacted their relationship with society in recent decades. Higher education institutions have ceased to be alienated from social dynamics and have increasingly participated in social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which they are inserted (Barnett, 1994)¹. According to Toohey (2002)², among the factors that contributed to the changes that occurred, were the change in the student profile, the research on teaching and learning (which expanded the spaces for reflection concerning the contexts and practices of higher education), and the organization of higher education institutions, which is becoming increasingly complex and with a much more diversified academic offer. Higher education is now seen as a “space for educational decisions” arising from external contexts and demands that influence the perspectives and expectations of the agents involved, demanding new ways of teaching and learning and enhancing cooperative and articulated contexts with the world of work (Mesquita, Flores C Lima, 2018)³.

Furthermore, the presence of international students in European higher education institutions has increased significantly in recent decades, driven by strategic policies of the European Union and its member states. Programmes such as Erasmus, created in 1987, and its evolution into Erasmus+ in 2014, the Bologna Process, the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Universities Initiative (launched in 2019) have played a central role in promoting academic mobility and fostering cultural and educational exchange between member countries and global partners. These policies not only promote the international competitiveness of European institutions but also reinforce values such as cooperation, inclusion and cultural diversity. The European Union sees academic mobility as a means of building a more integrated knowledge space, contributing to the economic and social development of the region and consolidating Europe's role. Accordingly, higher education programmes have become increasingly attractive to international students and students from diverse backgrounds, and there is a growing need to design the curriculum for the needs of a diverse student population

¹ Barnett, R. (1994). The limits of competence: knowledge, higher education and society. Open University Press.

² Toohey, S. (2002), Designing courses for higher education, Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:153049618>

³ Mesquita, Diana, Flores, Maria-Assunção, & Lima, Rui M. (2018). Desenvolvimento do currículo no ensino superior: desafios para a docência universitária. Revista iberoamericana de educación superior, 9(25), 42-61. <https://doi.org/10.22201/iisue.20072872e.2019.25.338>

but also for individuals to be equipped with the knowledge, skills and competence to become successful, confident and responsible citizens.

According to these developments in Higher Education the STARS EU-Alliance, a consortium of nine Universities from Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Czech Republic, Poland, Portugal, Spain/ Tenerife and also Albania as a candidate for EU status, was formed in order to strengthen the European community, exchange knowledge and develop jointly transnational study programmes – so called joint programmes, which involve collaboration between multiple higher education institutions.⁴

Joint programmes align their quality assurance processes with the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” (ESG)⁵ to ensure consistency and transparency across all partner institutions. This alignment not only enhances the credibility of the joint programme but also fosters trust among stakeholders, including students, faculty, and external bodies.

Therefore, this handbook contains the elaborated guidelines of our Alliance for quality assurance and all-important criteria to be observed with regard to creating joint programmes including cooperation, mobility, programme planning and design, curriculum and course development, teaching and learning/ teaching staff, student service and support structures as well as continuous improvement of our educational offers.

For an easy reading, the handbook consists of four sections with aligned chapters as follows.

⁴ The STARS EU-Alliance has agreed on the following definition of a Joint Programme: It is characterized by an integrated curriculum offered collaboratively by multiple higher education institutions, culminating in a double/multiple or joint degree, potentially in the form of a European Degree.

⁵ Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium.

Section 1: Overview on European Quality Criteria and Standards

Chapter 1: Quality Framework for Joint Programmes

The quality framework for joint programmes within the context of European Standards and guidelines is designed to ensure that educational offerings meet high standards of excellence and relevance. This framework is essential for fostering collaboration among institutions across Europe and enhancing the overall quality of higher education.

Joint programmes must adhere to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)⁶. These standards emphasize the importance of a systematic approach to quality assurance, ensuring that programmes are designed, implemented, and evaluated effectively (for a short overview, see [Document 4: ESG Standards](#)).

A key quality criterion is the definition of clear and measurable learning outcomes. Joint programmes should articulate what students are expected to know, understand, and be able to do upon completion. This alignment with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)⁷ facilitates transparency and comparability across different educational systems.

The programme and curriculum design of joint programmes should be coherent, relevant, and responsive to the needs both of students and the labour market. It should integrate diverse perspectives from the participating institutions and promote interdisciplinary learning. The inclusion of innovative teaching methods and assessment strategies is also crucial. For further information on STARS EU alliance strategies on innovative teaching methods, please see the [STARS EU Handbook of Innovative Learning and Teaching](#).

Quality criteria extend to the provision of adequate support structures and services for students. This includes academic advising, counselling, and resources that enhance the learning experience. Institutions should ensure that students have access to

⁶ Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium.

⁷ For details on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) please see: <https://europass.europa.eu/en/europass-digital-tools/european-qualifications-framework>

information and guidance throughout their studies. For further information please see [Chapter 3](#) of this Handbook and the STARS EU Handbook on Learning and Teaching communities.⁸

Joint programmes must implement robust internal and external quality assurance processes. This includes regular programme evaluations, stakeholder feedback, and adherence to accreditation requirements. Continuous improvement mechanisms should be in place to address identified areas for enhancement.

The framework encourages international collaboration and mobility, promoting the exchange of knowledge and best practices among institutions. Joint programmes should facilitate opportunities for students to engage in cross-border learning experiences, enhancing their cultural and academic competencies.

Engagement with stakeholders, including employers, alumni, and academic staff, is vital for ensuring that joint programmes remain relevant and of high quality. Their input can guide curriculum development and help to align educational outcomes with the needs of society.

In summary, the quality framework for joint programmes under European Standards and guidelines emphasizes a comprehensive approach to quality assurance, focusing on learning outcomes (see next [Chapter 1.1](#)), curriculum design, student support, and continuous improvement. By adhering to these criteria, institutions can enhance the quality and impact of their joint educational offerings.

1.1 Defining Learning Outcomes - Ensuring Quality, Relevance and Compliance of Educational Offers

In the context of joint programmes, the **establishment of clear and coherent learning outcomes** is essential for ensuring the quality and relevance of educational offerings. European Standards and guidelines emphasize the importance of aligning these outcomes with both academic and professional expectations, thereby enhancing the employability of graduates. This alignment ensures that learning outcomes are defined at appropriate levels, facilitating recognition and transferability of qualifications across borders.

The **process of defining learning outcomes** should involve a wide range of stakeholders, including academic staff, industry representatives, and students. This

⁸ The handbook can soon be found on the STARS EU homepage. In the meantime, please contact the WP3 leaders for the handbook.

collaborative approach ensures that the outcomes reflect both academic rigor and the competencies required by the labour market.

The quality framework should incorporate mechanisms for the continuous review and improvement of learning outcomes. Feedback from students, alumni, and employers can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the programme and inform necessary adjustments to the curriculum. For Example, to adjust it accordingly to future skills, which are also a key component of the STARS EU-Competencies Catalogue, developed in WP3. (For details, see STARS EU Competencies Catalogue). It is **crucial that learning outcomes are communicated transparently and accessibility to all stakeholders**, including prospective students. This transparency fosters informed decision-making and enhances the overall credibility of the joint programme.

Learning outcomes are preferred to be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time- bound (SMART) to achieve constructive alignment. **Constructive alignment** is a teaching and learning approach. It focuses on aligning learning activities and assessment tasks with the intended learning outcomes of a course. For further information on that principle see [Chapter 3](#) of this handbook. The application of this approach supports effective assessment of student performance and ensures that graduates possess the necessary skills and knowledge to meet the demands of their respective fields.

The quality framework should also consider the recognition of prior learning, allowing for the validation of skills and knowledge acquired outside formal education. This inclusivity can broaden access to joint programmes and support lifelong learning initiatives.

Compliance with external quality assurance frameworks – key aspects

In the context of joint programs, compliance with external quality assurance frameworks is essential to ensure that educational offerings meet established standards of quality and effectiveness. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) provide a comprehensive framework that institutions must adhere to maintain high educational standards.

Key aspects of compliance include:

- Quality Assurance Policies
- Stakeholder Involvement
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Transparency and Accountability

- External Reviews
- Accreditation and certification procedures.

For further information on these compliance aspects, see [Document 4: ESG Standards](#).

In conclusion, defining learning outcomes and qualifications within joint programmes is a critical component of ensuring educational quality and relevance. By adhering to European Standards and guidelines, institutions can create robust frameworks that not only enhance student learning experiences but also contribute to the overall advancement of higher education in Europe.

Section 2: Programme Design, Planning and Approval of a Joint Programme

Chapter 2: Dimensions of a Joint Programme

Programme and curriculum design are the pillars of any education system and the entire educational process. It is a means to achieve the aims of education and training, which are dynamic and evolve according to changing social, cultural, political and economic requirements. Naturally, **curriculum change** to reflect shifting trends in education, in teaching/learning/training, and in the labour market.

Learners need to develop and apply a **set of key competencies and relevant job-specific skills** which cannot be acquired through fragmented, content-overloaded curricula that are far removed from real life and the demands of the workplace

Curriculum plays a central role, providing a means by which learning outcomes acquired in instructional and learning processes can communicate more effectively with the competencies required in the labour market (for details, see: STARS EU Competencies Catalogue).

The design of the joint programme relies on four major dimensions: 1) the learning outcomes of the joint programme, agreed upon between the involved partners; 2) the fulfilment of the European criteria; 3) the inputs and requirements from Quality Assurance and Accreditation and 4) qualification.

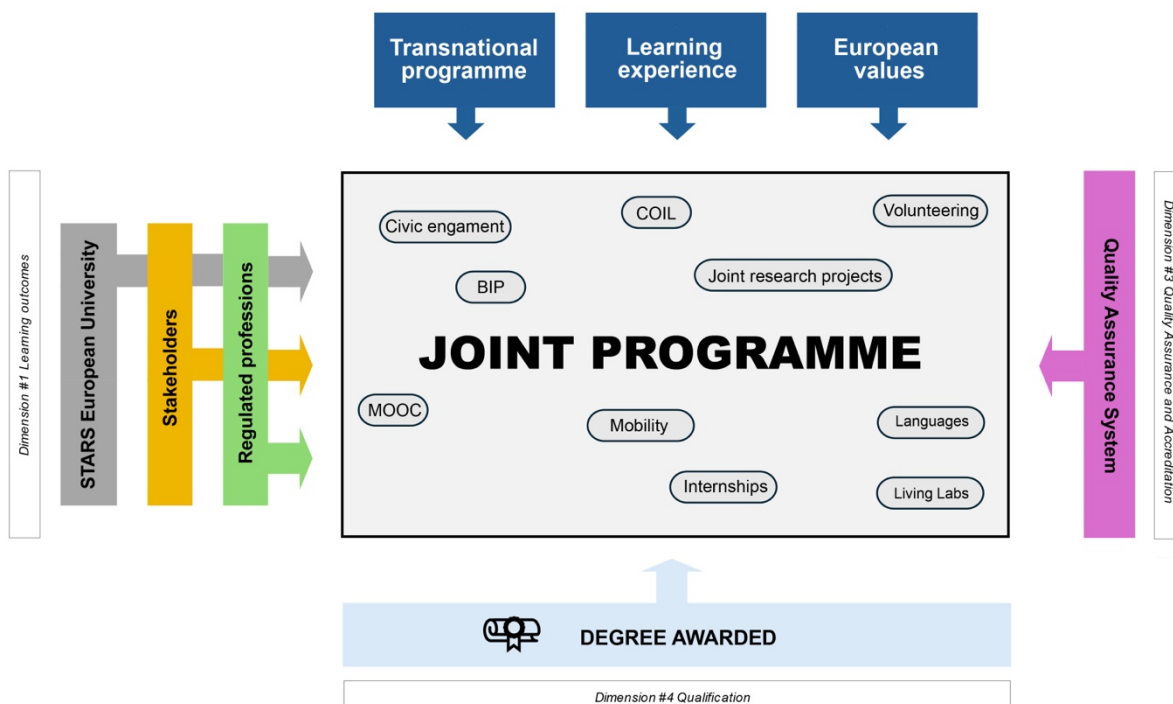


Figure 1: The design framework of STARS EU Joint Programmes⁹

Aligning programme design and curriculum development with learning outcomes is a crucial aspect that ensures students receive the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed in their chosen career paths. This process involves designing curricula aligned with the learning objectives and outcomes by applying the principles of the Constructive Alignment (see [Chapter 3](#) of this handbook). The goal is to **create a clear roadmap for students** that outlines what they need to learn, when they need to learn it, and how they can apply this knowledge in real-world situations.

One of the most significant benefits of aligning curriculum with learning outcomes is that it enables teachers/professors/instructors/educators to **measure student progress** more effectively. By setting clear learning objectives and outcomes, teachers can track their students' progress and identify areas where they may need additional support. This, in turn, allows them to adjust their **teaching strategies, methodologies or approaches and assessment tools** to better meet the students' needs. Particular

⁹ This figure was inspired by "The JEDI label: guidelines for application to joint degrees", JEDI Erasmus+ pilot project on the European degree label, March 2024 (https://blogs.upm.es/jedilabel/wp-content/uploads/sites/1141/2024/10/JEDI_UPM_WP3_D3.2_Guidelines-JEDI-label_v3.0_Reviewed_NPD.pdf)

emphasis should be placed in that context on transversal competencies that require cross-curricular and innovative methods.

When the curriculum is aligned with learning outcomes, students are more engaged, motivated, and invested in their learning, as they can see how their endeavours contribute to achieving the final objective: be well prepared to succeed in their future careers and contribute to the overall development of society. Additionally, alignment promotes transparency, consistency, and accountability in education, and is essential for ensuring high-quality standards, particularly in teaching and learning processes. This process further involves analyses and evaluations to identify gaps or discrepancies and make necessary adjustments.

Learning outcomes also provide a **foundation for accreditation and continuous improvement**, as they refer to the measurable knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies students acquire after completing a course or program. They describe what students should be able to do, understand, and demonstrate as a result of their learning experience/learning path. Therefore, **learning outcomes should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) to effectively guide curriculum development and assessment** as well as all phases of programme design, which will be introduced in the following chapters.

2.1 Planning and Designing a Joint Programme within the STARS EU-Alliance

The development of a joint programmes involving several institutions and/or partners when creating/designing a new study programme, has to meet certain requirements.

In addition to the alignment of the curriculum development with learning outcomes some are especially critical when discussing new programmes and are listed below:

- State clearly the purpose of the programme and its suitability on the institution's degree programme portfolio
- Describe how the learning outcomes of the programmes are in line with the needs of current or future labour market
- Justify the inclusion of the study programme within the educational offer institutional strategy, considering the institution's mission
- Characterize the strategic interest behind the new study programme, considering the Institution's educational, scientific, and cultural project.

2.2 STARS EU-Process and Procedures for Approval and Review of Joint Programmes

Since the launch of the European Education Area¹⁰, many universities have become involved in transnational education. The 2022 Commission Communication on a “European strategy for universities”¹¹ further developed the vision of deep transnational cooperation by proposing exploratory work towards a “European degree” as a flagship to boost the European dimension of higher education.

STARS EU is deeply committed to those determinations and aims to deepen and enhance the educational collaboration activities between the nine partners, especially in the field of (international) joint programmes. Therefore, having a clear, objective, uniform and consensual process and procedures is mandatory for the design and approval of joint programmes.

Following up the best practices and recommendations gathered from the ten Erasmus+ pilot projects selected as part of European policy experimentation on European degree, from others' Alliances experience, and the know-how, history and practice from the nine members of STARS EU, the creation of any joint programme is a process that unfolds in three phases:

1. Pre-study-Phase,
2. Plan and proposal-Phase,
3. Approval-Phase.

Please contact your institutional quality assurance department for further assistance through the process (see Supplemental Document: QA Contacts on Institutional and National Level). For further information on national requirements for joint programmes and your institutional quality assurance system please see Supplemental Documents: National Requirements for QA and Accreditation of Joint Degree Programmes as well as STARS EU Quality Assurance and Management Systems.

¹⁰ For further information on the European Education Area please see: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, COM(2020)625, <https://eurlex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0625>

¹¹ For further information on the European strategy for universities please see: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European Strategy for Universities, COM/2022/16, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/commission-communication-on-a-european-strategy-for-universities>

Phase 1. Pre-study

This initial phase focuses on assessing the feasibility and relevance of the joint programme, as well as establishing the foundations for collaboration between the partner institutions.

The topics below don't obey a specific order, nor do they have levels of priority.

- **Needs and context analysis**
 - Identify thematic areas/study fields of common interest and aligned with a common understanding of the learning outcomes.
 - Decide the programme's name, the degree granted, and the minimum ECTS to accomplish.
 - Assess the programme's relevance within the STARS EU's mission and educational and scientific objective.
 - Collect stakeholder's and/or associated partners' points of view on their expectations about a joint programme in that thematic area/study field.
 - On basis of the needs analysis, identify needs of the region, local stakeholders and potential students.
- **Definition of the partnership**
 - Identify the partner institutions that will collaborate on the programme.
 - Be aware of the fact that all institutions involved must be allowed to offer the joint programme.
 - Regarding the joint programme curriculum design aspect, two criteria help choose the partners: similarities between existing programmes and/or the complementarities among the partners. The first facilitates the identification of a cohesive set of core courses that form the programme's foundation, while the second one aids in developing original programmes that would not be possible without collaboration.
 - Identify the added value of the joint programme for each partner.
 - Define the initial roles and responsibilities of each partner.
 - Establish an informal preliminary agreement based on each partner's responsibility.
- **Mapping capacities and resources**
 - Preliminary view of the prospective student target group.
 - Estimation of student intake.
 - Key persons (academic and service staff) planned to commit to the programme.
 - Assess the infrastructure and resources available at each partner institution.

- Assess the infrastructure and resources available at STARS EU.
- Identify opportunities for complementarity and synergies between institutions.
- **Identification of Challenges and opportunities**
 - Analyse legislative, cultural and administrative differences that may impact programme implementation.
 - Consider accreditation and recognition degree requirements.

The STARS EU Steering Committee is the competent body to approve the pre-study of the joint programme presented by the team that has been designated to present it.

Phase 2. Plan and proposal

This second phase focuses on the detailed development of the programme and the consolidation of collaboration between partners.

- **Curriculum Development**
 - Define learning objectives/learning outcomes and transversal skills to be acquired by students.
 - Structure the curriculum, integrating courses/modules, ECTS credits and mobility periods (physical and virtual).
 - Define course/module contents and teaching and learning methodologies to ensure they contribute to the programme's overall objectives/learning outcomes.
 - Set the sequencing and progression of courses/modules that guarantee a logical and progressive development of knowledge and skills.
 - Establish the courses/modules assessment tools and methods.
 - Integrate research activities and applied learning experiences.
 - Integrate students and alumni (from the study field) recommendations, suggestions and counselling.
 - Integrate stakeholders and/or external expertise reference points.
 - Compliance with the European criteria and EQF levels...:
 - ...for Transnational programme organisation and management
 - ...for Learning experience
 - ...for European Values
 - For details, see [Document 2: European Criteria and EQF Levels](#)
- **Formalization of Collaboration**
 - Develop and sign detailed agreements between partners, specifying:
 - Requirements for mobility.
 - Requirements for credit recognition.
 - Resource and infrastructure sharing plans.

- Establish joint decision-making mechanisms/boards.
- **Financial Sustainability**
 - Prepare the budget and identify funding sources throughout programme lifecycle.
 - Ensure economic viability and efficient allocation of resources.
 - Detail the sustainable long-term resource plan and budget.
- **Quality Assurance**
 - Develop mechanisms for continuous monitoring, evaluation and improvement.
 - Model of diploma.
 - Prepare IT systems for collecting feedback from students, teachers, staff, external stakeholders, and each partner involved.

Phase 3. Approval

The final phase involves obtaining approvals to operationalize the joint programme:

- Pedagogical and scientific evaluation: each partner's pedagogical and scientific bodies approve the joint programme plan and proposal based on specific pedagogical and scientific criteria.
- Stakeholders' involvement: Advice and suggestions of stakeholders are taken into account when finalizing the plan and proposal
- Students' engagement: the STARS EU Student Board analyses the plan and proposal presenting suggestions for improvement.
- **Final approval:** the joint programme plan and proposal are approved by **STARS EU Commission**, pointing to its submission for accreditation.

2.3 Commitment and Strategies on Quality Assurance, Mobility, Inclusivity and Accessibility in Programme Design

Each joint programme has an appointed **strategic team responsible for the accreditation process, quality assurance, strategic planning and stakeholder collaboration**.

Regarding the **quality assurance activities**, this team certifies that the following activities are accomplished:

- **Internal Quality Assurance** - This includes annual self-assessments, or programme review activities, to identify the state of the art, strengths and development needs of the joint programmes.

- **Feedback** - Gathered through different surveys and course evaluations, students', alumni's, employers', and stakeholders' feedback help to find strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.
- **Learning Outcomes Assessment** - Regular monitoring and evaluation of the learning outcomes help assess student achievement and the effectiveness of teaching and learning activities.
- **Peer Reviews and External Evaluations** - Third-party perspectives are essential to achieve excellence; by undergoing peer reviews and external evaluations, we ensure that joint programmes meet national and international standards and are aligned with the best practices in the field.

The **STARS EU International Advisory Board**, composed of 7 independent, internationally recognized external experts from academia, research and industry, is responsible for quality assurance and external advice. It provides feedback on methodological appropriateness, relevance, integrity and compliance with the established requirements, work plans and timelines.

Through this way, it is possible to **provide evidence that continuous development and improvement are embedded in STARS EU educational processes**, and it is possible to make revisions, updates, upgrades and improvements in joint programmes regarding all involved demands or requirements, especially those concerning the conditions to be fulfilled for (re)- accreditation (see [Chapter 8](#)).

Integrating Mobility in Programme- and Curriculum Design

In the work phase of programme planning and elaborating the curriculum it is important to develop **suitable strategies for international mobility and collaboration**.

For accomplishing this, the recommendations on mobility from the STARS EU working group of WP 6 STARS EU Mobility Programme “Reach for the STARS” can give helpful input.

The WP6 “Need’s analysis Report on mobilities for STARS EU Partners” presents the perceptions, needs, and barriers regarding mobility opportunities within the STARS EU alliance across various target groups and summarises the lessons learnt of relevant STARS EU mobility activities to date. The identified target groups are full and part-time students, PhD students, researchers, teachers, technical and administrative staff, lifelong learners and external stakeholders.

The report gives an overview on relevant mobility formats (short-term, long-term, physical, virtual and blended, virtual exchange) and activities for different target groups based on best practices of each partner (For an overview, see [Document 3: Mobility](#)

[Activities](#)) and gives the following suggestions and recommendations, which are relevant for programme design:

- Prioritize and expand short-term physical mobility formats
- Take advantage of virtual mobility benefits to support inclusion and participation in different geographic locations.
- Enhance blended mobility opportunities such as BIPs that allow for both virtual and short-term physical mobility, as these are recognized for their relevance and flexibility.
- Develop a detailed catalogue of mobility opportunities to enhance transparency and facilitate better alignment between curricula and international opportunities across STARS EU partners.

Under this guidance and accomplishing the European criteria for learning experience **“Flexible and embedded student mobility”**¹², STARS EU joint programmes include in their structure a period for mobility.

Including structured mobility in the curriculum will reduce mobility barriers, foster student and staff mobility, and increase the visibility of new, innovative and international learning opportunities. It also improves the quality of the joint programme (by including an international academic offer) and thus increases its attractiveness. Therefore, it is mandatory to ensure that mobility path is embedded in curriculum development. However, the partners of the joint programme must be aware that they have to present multilateral mobility opportunities: physical, virtual or a combination of both, not only to make it available for the ones that can't travel but also to enable students to design their own flexible curricula.

As such, **mobility pathways for STARS EU joint programmes** can be carried out through a (traditional) study period abroad, BIPs for students, hybrid modules/courses, summer/winter schools, curricular internships and joint research projects and are supported through initiatives like the implementation of the European Student Card.

In the phase of developing a strategy for mobility, cooperation and collaboration, it is also advisable to take the above stated recommendations into account and ask for support from your International Office about suitable mobility opportunities for the joint programme.

¹² which states that a joint programme must offer an intercultural experience, including a minimum of one period of student physical mobility (that can be split into several stays) at one or more partner institution(s), and, alongside, there must be alternatives for students who cannot travel. For details, see [Document 2: European Criteria and EQF Levels](#).

The working group for WP 6 STARS EU Mobility Programme “Reach for the STARS” summarises the lessons learnt of relevant STARS EU mobility activities to date, collects the needs of the relevant target groups, identifies the target groups (full and part-time students, PhD students, researchers, teachers, technical and administrative staff, lifelong learners, external stakeholders) and appoints the relevant mobility formats (short-term, long-term, physical, virtual and blended, virtual exchange) and activities for different target groups based on best practices of each partner.

The most significant findings from this report as they are “food for thought” for the mobility integration strategy and collaboration in the design of joint programmes (see [Document 3: Mobility Activities](#)).

Inclusivity and accessibility in programme design

Following the European strategy for universities on Social Rights (2022)¹³, **ensuring inclusiveness, multiculturalism, and social connectivity are priorities of the STARS EU Alliance**, which is totally committed to creating educational, technological or innovation programmes that are accessible, equitable and relevant to all people, regardless of their individual characteristics or circumstances.

Inclusion in STARS EU joint programmes design ensures that all people, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, disability, socioeconomic status or other factors, have the same opportunities to participate in and benefit from the programme. This includes:

- **Representation:** Ensure that diverse voices are considered in programme design and implementation.
- **Cultural relevance:** Design programmes that respect and respond to target communities' cultural and social needs.
- **Promoting equity:** Providing all kinds of support to ensure that historically marginalized groups are not excluded.

¹³ In the COM/2022/16 (see footnote 11 and: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/commission-communication-on-a-european-strategy-for-universities>) is stated the following: “As set out in the first principle under the European Pillar of Social Rights, ‘everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning’. Europe has highly accessible higher education compared to the rest of the world. However, disadvantaged or discriminated groups (ethnic minorities, people with migration background, or with disability, people from poor families, children of low qualified parents) are still underrepresented among students, academic staff and researchers. Despite increasing access to tertiary education, higher education systems remain highly stratified. First-generation students and students with an immigrant or minority background have lower chances to achieve a tertiary education in the EU.”

Also, **accessibility in STARS EU joint programme** means eliminating physical, technological, communicational or other barriers, allowing anyone to access and benefit from the joint programme. This includes:

- **Physical accessibility:** Promote the physical spaces of all partners to be adapted for people with disabilities.
- **Digital accessibility:** Develop content and digital platforms that follow accessibility standards.
- **Clear language:** Use communication that is understandable and accessible to different literacy levels.

Therefore, STARS EU joint programme design follows the **basic principles of inclusiveness and accessibility:**

- **Co-design:** Actively involve stakeholders in the design process, especially those facing barriers to inclusion.
- **Flexibility:** Design programmes adaptable to different user needs and preferences.
- **Universality:** Create solutions that benefit the most significant number of people without additional adaptations.

Section 3: Curriculum

Development of a Joint Study Programme – Designing the Curriculum in Detail

Chapter 3: Key elements and principles of Constructive Alignment in Curriculum Design: Assuring Inclusivity, Student-Centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment in Alignment with Learning Outcomes

The design of academic programmes within the STARS EU Alliance is guided by a clear focus on intended learning outcomes (ILOs). This approach ensures that our educational offerings are purposeful, transparent, and aligned with the needs of students and society. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) underscore the importance of clearly articulated learning outcomes, facilitating programme transparency, transferability, and comparability across institutions.¹⁴

We employ the teaching and learning approach and the principle of **constructive alignment**, as developed by Biggs (1996), to ensure coherence between ILOs, teaching methods, and assessment strategies. This framework helps creating a learning environment where all components work together to support student achievement.¹⁵

Key elements of constructive alignment in our programmes include:

1. Clearly defined learning outcomes specifying knowledge, skills, and attitudes
2. Teaching methodologies that actively promote student-centred learning
3. Assessment strategies that accurately measure the achievement of learning outcomes.

¹⁴ Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium.

¹⁵ Biggs, John. (1996). Enhancing Teaching Through Constructive Alignment. Higher Education. 32. 347-364. 10.1007/BF00138871.

When defining learning outcomes you can refer to our STARS EU-Competency Catalogue for guidance, which is also mentioned in [Chapter 2.2](#).

For concrete curriculum development and course planning on the base of the constructive alignment, the Programme or Course Planning Matrix can be a helpful instrument as well (for further details see [Document 1: Programme or Course Planning Matrix](#)).

3.1 Pedagogical Approaches for Student-Centred Learning in Curriculum Design

The STARS EU Alliance recognizes the importance of student-centred learning in higher education. Our programmes incorporate a variety of active learning strategies to foster engagement and critical thinking (see [STARS EU Handbook of Innovative Learning and Teaching](#)):

- **Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Challenge-based Learning (CBL):** Students collaborate to solve complex, real-world problems, developing analytical and teamwork skills.
- **Flipped Classrooms:** Instructional content is delivered online before class, allowing in- person sessions to focus on discussion and application of concepts.
- **Project-Based Learning:** Extended projects requiring research, design, and presentation foster deeper understanding and practical skills.
- **Collaborative Learning:** Structured group work, discussions, and peer evaluation enhance student interaction and knowledge sharing.
- **Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL):** We leverage digital tools and online platforms to provide flexible and accessible education options, like Learning Management Systems (LMS) for resource sharing and discussions, virtual and augmented reality applications for simulating real-world experiences or AI-driven tutoring and analytics to support student progression.

By prioritizing student-centred learning and aligning our programmes with clearly defined learning outcomes, the STARS EU Alliance creates an educational experience that is inclusive, dynamic, and professionally relevant. Our commitment to continuous feedback and stakeholder engagement ensures that our programmes remain innovative and adaptable to the evolving needs of learners and society. We promote participation of **Industry and societal engagement** through employer panels, work-based learning opportunities, and interdisciplinary collaborations to help align our programmes with labour market needs and societal challenges.

In summary: to ensure the relevance and responsiveness of our programmes, we actively incorporate input from multiple stakeholders, use pedagogical student-centred learning methods and furthermore engage students through advisory boards, regular course evaluations, and co-creation models for curriculum development.

3.2 Inclusivity and Accessibility as Principles and Commitment--Addressing Student Diversity and Needs

As already outlined in Inclusivity and accessibility in programme design (see [Chapter 2.3](#)), the STARS EU Alliance recognizes the importance of catering to the diverse needs of students in higher education. Our approach ensures that all students can access, participate in, and succeed in their studies, regardless of their circumstances. This commitment is reflected in our curriculum design, support structures, and campus culture.

Our programmes are designed to accommodate diverse learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and individual abilities. We integrate universal design principles, flexible learning pathways, and personalized support mechanisms to create an inclusive learning environment.

Key strategies for inclusivity include:

- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** We implement teaching strategies that provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, ensuring that all students can access and engage with course materials effectively.
- **Flexible Learning Models:** Our programmes offer blended and online learning options to accommodate different learning preferences and life circumstances, allowing students to tailor their educational experience to their needs.
- **Competency-Based Learning:** Students are allowed to progress at their own pace while demonstrating mastery of skills, ensuring that individual learning styles and speeds are respected.
- **Culturally Responsive Teaching:** We incorporate diverse perspectives and materials that reflect the backgrounds of all students, fostering a rich and inclusive learning environment.

Commitment to student service and support structures for diverse Student Needs and Fostering an Inclusive Campus Culture

Our student-centred learning environment extends beyond the classroom to foster a sense of belonging and engagement. We encourage initiatives that promote equity, inclusion, and student leadership.

The STARS EU Alliance ensures that students receive comprehensive support throughout their academic journey. This includes academic assistance, mental health services, and career guidance.

Academic and Personal Support Services:

- **Advising and Mentorship Programmes:** We provide academic advisors and peer mentors to help students set goals and overcome challenges, offering personalized guidance throughout their studies.
- **Tutoring and Learning Support Centres:** Additional instructional resources and study assistance are available to support students in their academic endeavours.
- **Accessible Learning Environments:** We implement accommodations for students with disabilities, including assistive technology and alternative assessment methods, ensuring equal access to education for all.
- **Mental Health and Wellbeing Services:** Students have access to counselling, stress management workshops, and peer support groups to maintain their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Intercultural and International Student Support:

- **Language and Communication Support:** We offer language courses and writing assistance to support non-native speakers, ensuring they can fully participate in academic discourse.
- **Cultural Integration Programmes:** Workshops and events celebrate diversity and foster intercultural exchange, creating a rich and inclusive campus environment.
- **Student Networks and Affinity Groups:** We create safe spaces where students can connect with peers who share similar experiences, fostering a sense of community and belonging.

By addressing diverse student needs through thoughtful curriculum design, robust support systems, and an inclusive campus culture, the STARS EU Alliance creates an environment where all students feel valued and empowered to reach their full potential. This approach ensures that our learners have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances.

3.3 Assessment Principles and Practices in Curriculum Design

As already stated, Constructive alignment is a fundamental principle in designing effective assessments that support student learning and accurately measure achievement of intended learning outcomes (ILOs). This approach ensures coherence between learning objectives, teaching activities, and assessment methods.

The core idea of constructive alignment is that assessment tasks should authentically represent the course's intended learning outcomes. This alignment creates a learning environment where all components work synergistically to support student achievement.

Interlinkage assessment design and learning outcomes:

- Clearly defining learning outcomes before designing assessments and teaching activities
- Ensuring assessments directly measure the skills and knowledge outlined in the ILOs
- Designing learning activities that prepare students for the types of tasks they will encounter in assessments.

Learning outcomes should be specific, measurable, and clearly communicated to students. They serve as the foundation not only for designing teaching activities but also assessments. Well-crafted ILOs guide students' learning efforts and provide a clear framework for assessment.

Assessment Methods

A variety of assessment techniques should be employed to cater to different learning styles and provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

This may include:

- Formative assessments to provide ongoing feedback and support learning
- Summative assessments to evaluate overall achievement of learning outcomes
- A mix of individual and group-based assessments.

Authentic Assessment Practices

Assessments should reflect real-world applications of knowledge and skills, preparing students for future professional challenges. Examples include:

- Case studies and problem-solving scenarios
- Project-based assessments that simulate workplace tasks
- Portfolios showcasing a range of competencies developed over time.

Transparent Grading Criteria

Clear rubrics and assessment criteria ensure fairness and help students understand performance expectations. Transparency in grading promotes student engagement and self-directed learning.

Innovative Assessment Strategies

To support diverse learners and enhance the validity of assessments, institutions can implement innovative approaches such as:

- Technology-enhanced assessments using adaptive testing or virtual simulations
- Peer and self-assessment to develop critical reflection skills
- Competency-based assessments that focus on mastery of specific skills

In conclusion, Constructive alignment in assessment design is crucial for creating a coherent and effective learning experience. By ensuring that assessments are closely tied to intended learning outcomes and supported by appropriate teaching activities, institutions can foster deeper learning, enhance student engagement, and better prepare graduates for their future careers. Continuous review and refinement of assessment practices, informed by student feedback and emerging pedagogical research, is essential for maintaining the effectiveness of this approach.

3.4 Recommendations to foster fair and consistent Assessment Procedures across Institutions for the STARS EU-Alliance

Ensuring fair and consistent assessment across partner institutions is crucial for maintaining the integrity and credibility of joint programmes within the STARS EU Alliance. This section outlines key strategies and considerations for implementing equitable assessment practices, which will be developed in future activities of the alliance.

Transparency and Standardization

To achieve meaningful and equitable assessments, the STARS EU Alliance must establish standardized criteria that ensure consistency across diverse learning environments.

This involves:

- Developing clear grading rubrics that are applicable across all partner institutions
- Implementing transparent assessment policies that are communicated to all stakeholders
- Creating mechanisms to ensure assessment fairness across different cultural and institutional contexts

Transparency in assessment practices is essential for building trust among students and ensuring that all learners are evaluated on an equal footing. This includes providing clear information about assessment criteria, weightings, and expectations well in advance of deadlines.

Key Aspects of Fair Assessment

The following Procedures and Practices can support fair assessment proceedings:

Clearly Defined Rubrics

Establishing standardized grading criteria is fundamental to ensuring consistency across institutions. The STARS EU Alliance should:

- Develop comprehensive rubrics that clearly articulate performance levels for each assessment criterion
- Ensure rubrics are adaptable to different disciplinary contexts while maintaining core standards
- Regularly review and update rubrics based on feedback from faculty and students

Assessment Moderation

To maintain consistency across partner institutions, the alliance should implement robust moderation processes:

- Conduct cross-institutional moderation sessions to calibrate grading standards
- Use sample assessments to train assessors and ensure alignment in grading practices
- Implement double-marking or second-marking for a sample of assessments to verify consistency

Appeals and Review Processes

A fair assessment system must include transparent procedures for students to seek clarification or challenge their grades:

- Establish a clear appeals process that is consistent across all partner institutions
- Provide students with the right to request reassessments or grade reviews
- Ensure that appeal outcomes are reviewed by independent assessors to maintain objectivity

Ethical Considerations in Assessment

Upholding ethical assessment practices is crucial for maintaining academic integrity and avoiding biases in grading. The STARS EU Alliance should focus on:

Plagiarism Detection and Prevention

- Implement standardized plagiarism detection software across all partner institutions
- Develop consistent policies for handling academic misconduct cases
- Provide education and resources to students on academic integrity and proper citation practices

Blind and Anonymous Grading

To reduce potential biases, especially in subjective assessments:

- Implement systems for anonymous submission and grading of assignments where appropriate
- Use student ID numbers instead of names on assessed work to ensure impartiality
- Train faculty on recognizing and mitigating unconscious biases in assessment¹⁶

Regular Training for Faculty

Ensuring alignment with ethical grading standards requires ongoing professional development:

- Conduct regular training sessions on assessment practices for faculty across all partner institutions
- Share best practices and case studies to illustrate ethical assessment principles
- Provide resources and support for faculty to implement fair and consistent grading practices

The recommendations show that maintaining fair, transparent, and consistent assessment practices across partner institutions is essential for the success of joint programmes within the STARS EU Alliance. By implementing standardized assessment policies, robust moderation processes, and ethical grading practices, the alliance can ensure equitable learning experiences for all students, regardless of their home institution or cultural background.

These efforts not only uphold academic integrity but also foster trust in the evaluation processes, enhancing the overall quality and reputation of STARS EU joint programmes. As the higher education landscape continues to evolve, regular review and adaptation of these practices will be necessary to meet the changing needs of students and maintain the alliance's commitment to excellence in education.

¹⁶ <https://www.turnitin.com/blog/equality-vs-equity-in-integrity-and-assessment-fair-practices-for-all>

Chapter 4 Organizing the Student Admission Process and defining Policies for Progression, Recognition and Certification

To ensure quality in joint-degree programmes, it is essential to maintain high educational standards and offer substantial value to students. This also includes the area of student admission, progression, recognition, and certification. According to the European quality framework for joint programmes, student admission process and policies on progression, recognition and certification are important and essential elements when developing new study programmes.

In the phase of programme- and curriculum design of a joined study programme it is therefore recommendable to ask at an early stage for advice and guidance of your institutional contact person for Quality Assurance (see Supplemental Document: QA Contacts on Institutional and National Level) because national and legal requirements for student admission, progression, recognition and certification which are relevant and binding for each partner institution are complex and might differ from each other.

4.1 Joint Student Admission Process and Recruitment Policy

Student Admission is a comprehensive process encompassing various steps, from establishing admission requirements, through recruitment, to selection. Partner institutions must determine whether student admission will be centralised or decentralised, organized jointly or separately. In either case, it is critical to establish a cohesive, unified policy that governs the entire admission process. The conditions for admitting students into joint-degree programmes should be clear, consistent, transparent and equitable, formally approved by the partner universities, and made publicly available to prospective candidates.

The **joint recruitment policy** should address the following elements and steps:

1. define both formal and substantive admission requirements
2. implement a standardised application and recruitment
3. process establish a unified selection committee.

Step 1: Defining Admission Requirements

The admission requirements must comply with national and institutional regulations, especially those pertinent to joint programmes. It is advisable to align with the highest national standards to ensure recognition of the qualifications awarded and to avoid conflicts with legal requirements. It is equally important to make sure that the admission

criteria and selection process are defined in line with the programme's level and discipline or field of study. The following principles are recommended for consideration when establishing student admission requirements:

- **Criteria and Standards:** Admission criteria should be clearly articulated and consistent with the academic expectations of all partner institutions, covering, among others, qualifications, language proficiency, relevant experience, and common eligibility standards.
- **Transparency and Coherence:** Detailed, accessible information about the admission process should be provided to potential applicants, outlining how their applications will be evaluated across institutions.
- **Student Support:** Prospective students should have access to guidance services, such as counselling and informational sessions, to help them understand the unique aspects of joint- degree programmes.

Step 2: Implementation of a Standardised Application and Recruitment Process

The recruitment procedure plays a crucial role in the admission process. Key components of this procedure should include:

- required application documents
- application and recruitment timelines
- communication channels for announcing selection outcomes
- appeal mechanisms for challenging selection decisions

Information about the recruitment procedure should be easily accessible on the partner institutions' websites, or ideally, on a centralised joint platform to promote consistency and transparency. Whether the application process is centralised or decentralised, all partner institutions must have access to the relevant details to ensure clarity and fairness.

Step 3: Establish a Joint Selection Committee

The selection process should involve input from all partner institutions, with a final decision made by a joint selection committee. It is recommended that both academic and administrative staff from each partner institution participate in the selection process and that all responsibilities associated with the selection procedure are distinctly defined.

4.2 Policies for Student Progression

Student Progression refers to students' advancement through the stages of a joint-degree programme. The policies that partner institutions establish regarding student progression should address:

- **Curriculum Design:** A structured outline of the required courses and credits.
- **Assessment and Evaluation:** Clear methods for evaluating student performance, including exams, projects, and ongoing assessments.
- **Monitoring and Support:** Services like academic advising, tutoring, and counselling to ensure students succeed.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Procedures for gathering student feedback on their experience, challenges, and suggestions for improvement.
- **Retention Strategies:** Initiatives to maintain student engagement, such as mentorship programmes and community-building activities.

To support students' academic progress, partner institutions should ensure consistent and transparent admission, recognition, and completion procedures. Monitoring tools must be developed to track and respond to student progression, ensuring fair and impartial evaluation of students' achievements. Progression assessments should consider the specific nature of the programme and include evaluations of exams, projects, theses, practical placements (provided student placements are included in the study programme) and other academic achievements related to the joint-degree programme. They all confirm that students have achieved the learning outcomes.

4.3 Policies for Recognition of Qualifications and Study Periods

According to the Lisbon Recognition Convention qualifications obtained abroad should be recognised unless there is a substantial difference from the equivalent local qualification. Recognition decisions must be based on appropriate information, ensuring transparency and coherence. Recognition procedures should be reliable, consistent, and provide options for appeal. Fair recognition of higher education qualifications and periods of study is essential for promoting mobility and ensuring students' academic success.

Tools for recognition procedures include the Lisbon Recognition Convention, its supplementary texts, the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions, and resources from the ENIC/NARIC networks.

4.4 Policies for Certification

Certification is the formal acknowledgment of programme completion. Students should receive documentation outlining the qualification awarded, including details on

learning outcomes, programme level, content, and status. Graduation documents should validate the completion of the programme and the attainment of academic standards.

Depending on the legal requirements of each partner institution graduates may receive:

- two (or more) separate diplomas – one from each partner institution involved in the joint- degree programme or
- a single joint diploma issued by all the partner institutions; issuing a joint diploma indicates that the student has met the requirements of all partner institutions involved in the joint-degree programme.

In the case of a joint diploma, all partner institutions must collaboratively define its format and content, ensuring that all institutional and national requirements are fulfilled – in particular the conditions and provisions stipulated by law. The process of establishing the template of a joint diploma should include a clear timeline, developed in consultation with the partner institutions.

Transparent conditions should be established for students to obtain their diploma, with agreed- upon standards for assessing the achievement of learning outcomes, including knowledge, skills, and competencies. These criteria should be developed and endorsed by all participating institutions.

Chapter 5. Standards, Requirements and Recommendations on Resources regarding the Joint Programme (Staff, Facilities, Student Support Structures and Services)

Regarding the complex topic of resource planning for a study programme, this chapter gives an overview on necessary requirements and recommendations.

5.1 Standards for Academic and Support Staff

Members of the STARS EU Alliance are committed to maintaining the highest standards for their staff while fostering a supportive environment that empowers them to work effectively. In this environment:

- **professional development** for educators is actively supported, with ample opportunities for growth;

- **clear, transparent, and fair recruitment procedures and working conditions** are established, with a focus on education as a priority;
- **research activities** are encouraged to strengthen the integration of education, science, and research;
- **innovation in teaching methods and the adoption of modern technologies** is actively promoted.

STARS EU Alliance members are aware that the role of educators is pivotal in providing students with the opportunity to acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies. The growing diversity of the student population and the increased focus on learning outcomes require a shift towards student-centred learning and teaching, which in turn redefines the role of educators.

When redistributing, planning, and delivering educational resources and student support, STARS EU Alliance members consider the diverse needs of the international student community (e.g., adult learners, part-time students, working students, and those with specific needs), the shift towards student-centred learning, and the adoption of flexible teaching and learning methods.

STARS EU Alliance strives to empower the staff with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed through training and development opportunities. These programmes primarily aim to:

- enhance pedagogical skills to support student-centred learning approaches;
- build cultural competence to address the needs of an increasingly diverse international student body, including learners with specific needs;
- encourage participation in international training, research collaborations, and staff exchange programmes to expose staff to Alliance's best practices;
- promote interdisciplinary collaboration by providing access to research-focused training and cross-institutional initiatives.

The STARS EU Alliance aims to regularly organise workshops and training sessions to address emerging trends, innovative practices, modern technologies and various institutional needs. These sessions are designed to:

- share best practices in teaching, research, and administrative processes across Alliance members, fostering a community of learning;
- address specific challenges faced by academic and support staff, such as integrating digital tools or navigating cultural diversity;
- offer flexible formats, such as in-person workshops, virtual training, and hybrid sessions, to accommodate varied schedules, locations and preferences;

- include hands-on activities, expert-led discussions, and peer collaboration to create engaging and practical learning experiences.

The STARS EU Alliance emphasizes the importance of evaluating professional development initiatives to ensure they deliver measurable benefits. The STARS EU Alliance employs robust evaluation mechanisms, including:

- pre- and post-training assessments to measure knowledge and skill acquisition;
- participant feedback surveys to gauge satisfaction and gather suggestions for improvement;
- performance indicators such as increased use of innovative teaching methods or improved student outcomes to assess long-term impact;
- regular reporting and review cycles to refine training programme design and delivery.

The STARS EU Alliance actively fosters a culture of continuous improvement, encouraging staff to embrace lifelong learning and innovation in their roles, promoting the idea that learning is an ongoing process, not limited to formal training. Leveraging the Alliance's network, the institutions strive to facilitate knowledge exchange and shared learning among member institutions.

5.2 Standards for Facilities and Student Support Structures and Services

Student support structures and activities (see Chapters 2, 3 and 3.2) as well as facilities can be organized in various ways depending on the institutional context. However, through an internal QA system, STARS EU Alliance members ensure the efficient use of resources, their accessibility, and the communication of their availability to students. The member institutions recognize that support and administrative staff play a key role in delivering these services. It is therefore essential that they are well-qualified and have opportunities to develop their skills.

The STARS EU Alliance members strive to ensure that the available **facilities**, including lecture halls, laboratories, libraries, digital infrastructure, and others, are sufficient and appropriate to meet the intended learning outcomes. Regular assessments are conducted to ensure that technological advancements, accessibility standards, and pedagogical requirements are met. Investments in modern learning environments, including virtual and hybrid learning spaces, shall contribute to fostering innovation and interactive education.

STARS EU Alliance members recognize that **student support structures and services** play a crucial role in facilitating academic achievement and personal development of student (please see as well [Chapter 3](#) for further information on curriculum design).

Therefore, they strive to provide comprehensive support through various services such as academic advising, career counselling, psychological support, mentoring services and others. Additionally, the members aspire to provide students the access to extracurricular activities, professional networking opportunities, and peer-to-peer learning initiatives that contribute to a holistic educational experience with feedback mechanisms in place to continuously improve support services based on student needs.

Recognizing the importance of international and intercultural exposure in higher education, the alliance implements **measures to foster and facilitate student mobility within the programme duration**. This includes academic recognition policies, flexible learning pathways, financial support for mobility programmes, and dedicated guidance on administrative and logistical arrangements. Collaboration with international partners ensures that students benefit from exchange opportunities, joint projects, and cultural immersion, strengthening their global competencies. (please see as well [Chapter 2](#) for further information on mobility strategies and [Chapter 3](#) for integrating intercultural and international student support activities in programme- and curriculum design).

By ensuring the adequacy of staff, facilities, and support services, the STARS EU Alliance upholds its commitment to providing a high-quality learning experience, empowering students to achieve their academic and professional aspirations.

Section 4: Defining Quality Standards, Procedures and Methods to assure and support Continuous Programme Development

Joint programmes must implement suitable and sustainable internal and external quality assurance processes, which include regular programme evaluations, integrating stakeholder feedback and adherence to accreditation requirements. Continuous improvement mechanisms should be implemented which address identified areas for enhancement and improvement. Therefore, the following chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 are focussing on relevant aspects of Quality Assurance and continuous study programme development of our STARS EU educational offers.

Chapter 6 Quality Assurance through Reporting and Documentation

This chapter focusses on the importance of standardized quality assurance procedures and gives recommendations for documentation and reporting. The STARS EU-Alliance supports and conducts the different stages of programme planning, design and development on the basis of templates and guidelines which will be outlined as follows.

6.1. Standards for Programme Design, Reporting and Documentation

Internal quality assurance procedures should be reliable, useful, predefined, consistently implemented and published. They include regular self-assessments, leading to a report, and consistent monitoring.

External quality assurance in its various forms can verify the effectiveness of institutions' internal quality assurance, act as a catalyst for improvement and offer the institution new perspectives. It will also provide information to assure the institution and the public of the quality of the institution's activities.

The accreditation standards and procedures must be publicly available in an accessible format. External quality assurance procedures are reliable, useful, predefined,

consistently implemented and published. Accreditation standards and procedures must be made available to the public in an accessible format.

The STARS EU alliance uses standardized documents and templates in accessible formats and in the alliance design. In the annex of this handbook, you can find several helpful templates for the planning, designing and evaluation/accreditation of study programmes.

The STARS EU alliance uses standardized documents and templates for the planning, designing and evaluation/accreditation of study programmes in accessible formats and in the alliance design, which are supplemental documents to this QA Handbook:

- Template Pre-Study as well as Plan and Proposal of a programme
- Template Self-Evaluation Report
- Practical Guidelines for International Programme Accreditation Procedures of Joint Programmes
- Overview on National Requirements for QA and Accreditation of Joint Degree Programmes
- Contact list of institutional QA-managers
- Overview of institutional QA systems of each partner

Depending on the Alliance's needs, there will be more templates and documents developed in the future.

6.2 Recommendations for Documentation via Monitoring, Evaluation and Revision

Reliable data is crucial for informed decision-making and for knowing what is working well and what needs attention. Effective processes to collect and analyse information about study programmes and other activities feed into the internal quality assurance system.

The information gathered depends, to some extent, on the type and mission of the institution. The following are of interest:

- Key performance indicators (KPI) (for definition and details see [Chapter 6.2.1](#));
- Profile of the student population;
- Student progression, success and drop-out rates;
- Students' satisfaction with their programmes;
- Learning resources and student support available;
- Career paths of graduates.

Various methods of collecting information may be used. It is important that students and staff are involved in providing and analysing information and planning follow-up activities.

6.2.1 Definition of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Metrics

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are performance metrics that can be tracked, measured and analysed. KIPs are used to understand how a programme or an institution is progressing toward their strategic goals. The following are examples of commonly used KIPs, grouped into five categories:

Category	Key Performance Indicator	Description
Financial	Student Financial Aid Percentages	Track the number of students receiving scholarships or government aid
	Programme & Department Budgets	Analyse budgets by term, semester or year and compare with actual spend
Student Success	Graduation Rates	The percentage of students who graduate and the amount of time it takes them
	Course Success Rates	Monitor completion rates on a course-by-course basis
	Persistence Rates	Understand and monitor the factors that affect students' persistence on to the next semester
	Student Outcomes	Keep track of students after graduation to see where their education takes them
	Disproportionate Impact	Measure gaps between certain cohorts and your overall student body
Admissions and enrolments	Transfer Rates	Number of students who apply and are accepted that are transferring from other institutions
	Acceptance Rates	The percentage of students who applied and were accepted
	Student Acceptance by Zip Code	See where your students are coming from, and use the information to tailor marketing programmes
	Year-Over-Year Enrolment	Monitor daily enrolment data to make year-over-year comparisons
	Retention Rates	What percentage of students return for the next semester?
Faculty and Staff	Student-to-Faculty Ratio	The number of students per faculty member, on a campus-wide basis or by department.
	Faculty & Staff Tenure Rate	The length of employment for faculty members and other support staff members

	Faculty Turnover	Supporting tenure numbers, turnover rates identify areas with weak employee retention
	Part-Time vs. Full-Time Faculty	Examine the costs and benefits for both types of instructors
	Utilization of teaching spaces as classrooms or labs	See when and how teaching resources are being used
	Sustainability	Evaluate emissions, keep track of LEED certification data and monitor utility spends
	On-Campus Housing & Commuters	Know the lifestyle of your students to influence future campus upgrades
Facilities and resources		

Each partner will establish the KIPs to be used for the monitoring of the programme's performance in accordance with its quality policies and national regulations.

6.2.2 Regularly Monitoring, Evaluation and Revision

Periodic monitoring, evaluation and revision of study programmes are designed to ensure that they meet the needs of students and society, that provision remains appropriate and to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students.

Typically, these arrangements include evaluation of:

- the content of the programme in the light of the most recent research in the discipline concerned, thus ensuring that the programme is up to date;
- the changing needs of society;
- the workload, progress and success of students;
- the effectiveness of student assessment procedures;
- student expectations, needs and satisfaction with the programme;
- the learning environment, support services and their relevance to the programme.

Programmes are periodically evaluated and reviewed involving students and other stakeholders. The information gathered is analysed and the programme is adapted to keep it up to date. Any action planned or taken as a result is communicated to all parties concerned.

Improvement measures give rise to the implementation and monitoring of an action plan. Follow-up indicators are defined and monitored, such as cohort follow-up, success rate, insertion rate. These evaluations lead to continuous programme improvement. The revised programme specifications are published.

The report must meet the requirements of the quality assurance standard point by point, and provide documented evidence of this, including:

- Programme management
- Programme Aims
- Teaching and Learning Process
- Resources
- Student admission, transfer, progression and graduation
- Internal Quality Assurance

The compiled report includes:

- The training course self-assessment report
- Documents with evidential value
- A brief presentation of the study programme:
 - The aims and objectives of the programme (sectors of activity and target occupations);
 - A demonstration of the way the programme fits in with the educational guidelines and thematic priorities of the institution;
 - Prove of existence of a national, European or international label;
 - A presentation of the programme's set up: diagram of degree courses and student career paths upstream and downstream, including the options and personalised pathways offered to students and the possible gateways;
 - Links with neighbouring courses in the same cycle
 - The course outline, broken down into blocks of knowledge and skills with the associated ECTS, as well as the table of correspondence between the UEs and the reference framework.

Chapter 7 Programme Transparency and Public Information – Dissemination Strategies, Public Reporting and Communication Methods

Information on institutions' activities is useful for prospective and current students as well as for graduates, other stakeholders and the public.

Therefore, institutions provide information about their activities, including the programmes they offer and the selection criteria for them, the intended learning outcomes of these programmes, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning

and assessment procedures used, the pass rates and the learning opportunities available to their students as well as graduate employment information.

7.1 Programme Information to Stakeholders

Effective dissemination of programme information ensures stakeholders across the STARS EU Alliance are informed about objectives, progress, and outcomes. Strategies include:

- Publicly accessible information on study programme(s) (e.g. admission criteria, learning outcomes, qualification awarded, teaching, learning and assessment procedures, pass rates, learning opportunities, graduate employment information)
- Publish Information materials on study programme(s), e.g. flyer, website
- Maintain a centralized STARS EU Alliance website with a dedicated section for programme updates, achievements, and detailed descriptions accessible to all stakeholders.
- Publish and distribute periodic newsletters tailored for alliance members, highlighting significant developments, collaborative efforts, and upcoming activities.
- Use official STARS EU Alliance social media accounts, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Bluesky, and other relevant platforms, to provide quick updates and ensure broader outreach.
- Collaborate with local and international media to showcase programme milestones and significant events.
- Organize events to directly communicate progress and foster engagement among stakeholders.
- Tailor information dissemination to address the specific needs of member institutions and local stakeholders.

7.2. Public Reporting of Quality Assurance and Evaluation Results

Transparency in quality assurance is a cornerstone of the STARS EU Alliance's commitment to accountability. Public reporting methods include:

- Publish Annual Alliance Reports summarizing key performance indicators, evaluation outcomes, and programme impacts across all member institutions.
- Develop accessible infographics and summaries of evaluation results to effectively communicate findings to non-specialist audiences.
- Host regular forums and public consultations to share findings, foster discussions, and gather feedback from stakeholders.

- Highlight case studies and success stories to showcase successful initiatives and positive outcomes, demonstrating the programme's value.
- Provide public access to non-sensitive quality assurance documentation through the alliance's website for transparency and accountability.
- Ensure anonymity and confidentiality when publishing aggregated data to safeguard the identities of students and staff.

7.3. Communication Methods for Accessibility of Programme Information

Accessibility ensures inclusivity and equitable access to information. The alliance prioritizes the following practices:

- Provide materials in English and native languages spoken across member institutions to ensure accessibility for all.
- Ensure digital accessibility by adhering to recognized standards to accommodate users with disabilities.
- Offer information in multiple formats such as text, video, audio, and interactive content to meet diverse user needs.
- Utilize local events and community spaces to reach stakeholders with limited access to digital resources.
- Set up multilingual hotlines and support emails to handle inquiries related to alliance programmes.
- Host events in accessible venues that meet mobility standards and integrate e-campus platforms for hybrid and virtual engagement opportunities.

7.4 Communication Channels

Clear and effective communication channels are vital for fostering collaboration and trust within the STARS EU Alliance. Strategies include:

- Assign QA representatives in each member institution to streamline communication and coordination, for contact list of QA representatives see Supplemental Documents.
- Conduct regular surveys, focus groups, and suggestion platforms to encourage continuous improvement.
- Share updates through newsletters, email campaigns, and intranet systems to keep stakeholders informed.
- Provide training for communication and QA teams to ensure clarity, consistency, and professionalism.
- Use shared digital and collaborative tools and intranet systems to facilitate internal communication and collaboration

Chapter 8 Development of Continuous Improvement and Review Processes in the STARS EU-Alliance Joint Programmes

All alliance partners are committed to actively contribute to the continuous improvement of joint programmes by sharing and collectively critically discussing the appropriateness of all quality assurance activities that take place within the programme. To achieve this commitment, **cyclical monitoring** will be implemented by each partner for the adherence to the common principles and basic practices endorsed by the alliance, through gathering of information from the quality assurance activities; formulation and follow-up of actions to further improve the common quality assurance system and timely communication of feedback on the joint quality assurance process. When it becomes necessary, corrective actions will be taken to ensure and maintain the functional suitability of the common assessment system and the quality of education in all its aspects.

For each joint programme, the involved partner institutions will design and implement the necessary "best practices" to ensure the appropriate functioning of the internal system for ensuring the quality of the alliance's joint programme. These practices include the following elements: stakeholder involvement, time, scope, tools, and efficient communication.

These "best practices" of QA of joint programmes will potentially provide all partners with the flexibility to manage their own internal systems on an institutional level while ensuring effective communication and decision-making at the alliance level.

The alliance partners will seek to monitor and further develop the quality assurance policies and procedures in the field of evaluation and maintenance of the quality of education and training in all their aspects, through a transparent, sustainable and oriented towards continuous improvement approach. According to it, it will be possible to ensure that the approved joint programmes are embedded in a strong collaborative, transparent and sustainable quality culture in which stakeholders work together to achieve a high quality and inclusive education in Europe.

The alliance partners must regularly monitor and review the joint degrees offered, ensuring that the objectives are fulfilled, as well as that the programmes meet the needs of students and society.

The review is based on the following issues:

1. The quality of the study programme
2. The relevance of the public information
3. The efficacy of the internal quality assurance system
4. The suitability of the teaching staff on the programme
5. The efficacy of learning support systems
6. The quality of the programme outcomes.

The monitoring process must facilitate the continuous improvement of the programme.

8.1 Mechanisms for incorporating Feedback into the Programme

Involvement of stakeholders

It will be relevant that all partners guarantee the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, both internal and external. Internal stakeholders include students, teaching staff and support staff of the programme. External stakeholders include academic peers, representatives of the profession, employers, traineeship supervisors and alumni of the programme. The partners commit themselves to be fully transparent about which stakeholders they involve and how, sharing the inputs from the stakeholders with the management of the joint programme (see as well [Chapter 3](#)).

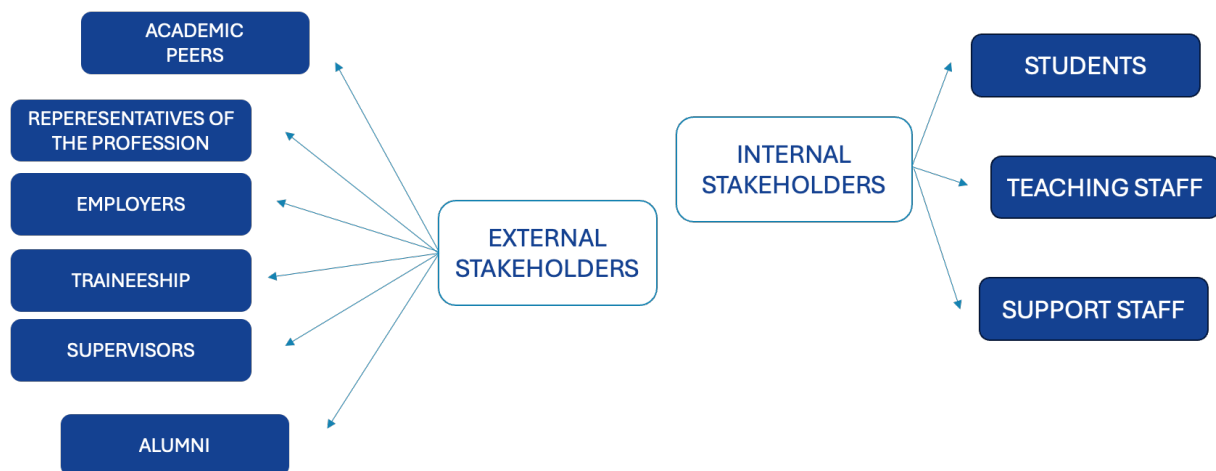


Figure 2: Internal and External Stakeholders

Tools and methods for collecting feedback

The partners will use their own tools and methods to seek input from stakeholders. The partners commit themselves to be fully transparent on which tools are being used and will report on the results on an annual basis. A mix of both qualitative and quantitative tools will be used. At programme level, the management will have the possibility to make use of programme-wide questionnaires to gather feedback from all students on the programme as a whole.

The following tools may be used as examples:

- surveys
- interviews
- discussion forums
- evaluation meetings
- suggestion boxes

The partners are encouraged to promote stakeholders' participation by recognising their contribution to the monitoring and improvement of programmes, so that they can perceive the value and usefulness of their input.

Furthermore, **transparency and reporting mechanisms are crucial**. The transparency and reporting mechanisms processes shall be carried out in accordance with the stipulations set out in chapter 7 of this handbook.

8.2 Impact Analysis and Improvement Planning

- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are performance metrics that can be tracked, measured and analysed. KIPs are used to understand how a programme or an institution is progressing toward their strategic goals (for examples of common KPIs see [Chapter 6.2.1](#)).
- Each partner will establish the KIPs to be used for the monitoring of the programme's performance in accordance with its quality policies and national regulations.

Data collection and analysis

The collection, analysis and interpretation of data to facilitate informed decision-making will follow the procedures described in chapter 6 of this handbook.

Implementation and monitoring of improvement plans

Monitoring and evaluation are essential for continuous improvement.

Implementing and monitoring improvement plans involves putting a plan into action, tracking progress, and evaluating results. This process helps to ensure that the plan is being executed as outlined and that the objectives are being achieved.

The following chart shows the relevant phases of an improvement plan and defines relevant tasks which need to be carried during Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation.

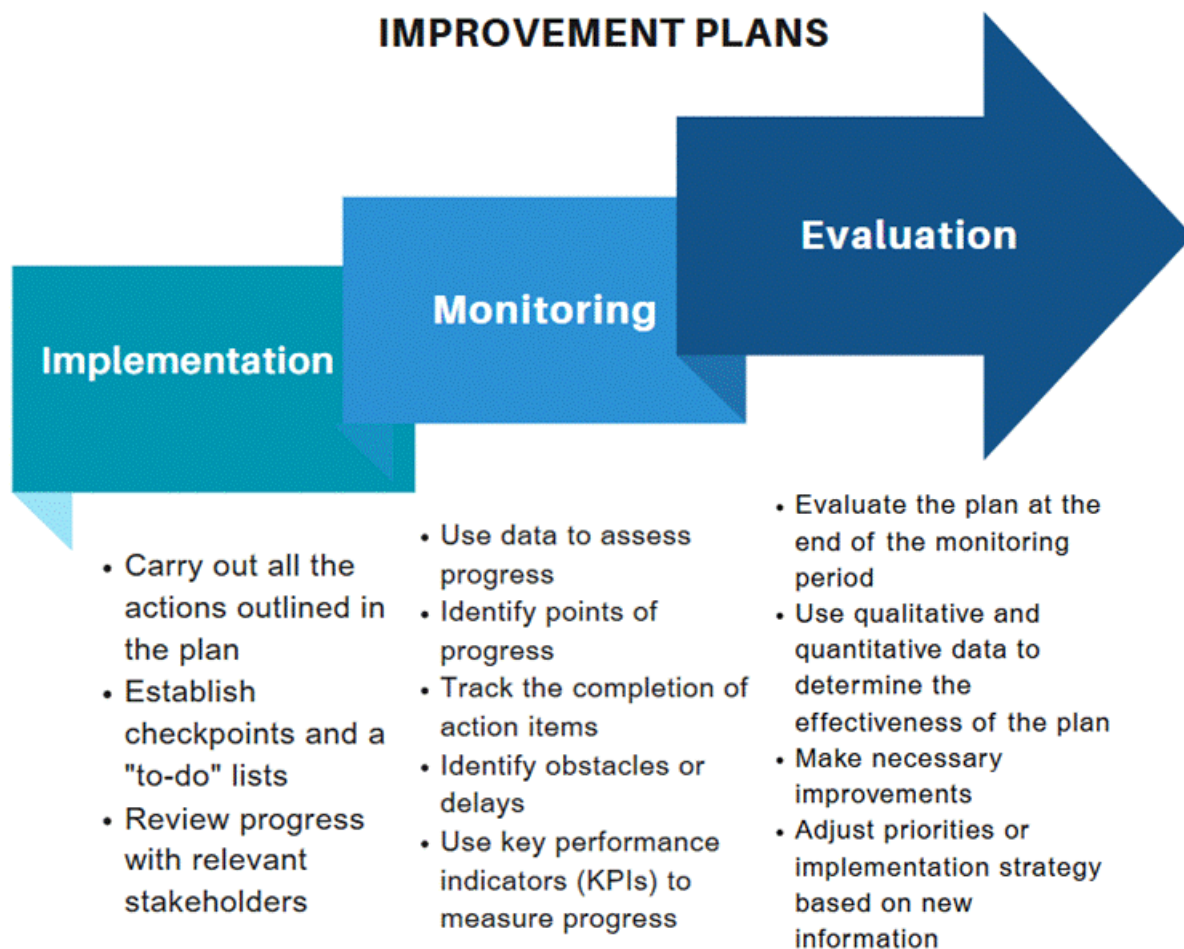


Figure 3: Improvement Plans

8.3. Sharing Best practices and Lessons Learned on Continuous Improvement and Review Processes

Communication of stakeholders' concerns

Each partner will communicate in a transparent manner which issues were identified by stakeholders, and how they will be remedied by the partner institution. Those issues which cannot be dealt with on a local level will be shared with the programme management for consideration. Each partner will also actively identify good practices and share these with the other partners.

Mechanisms for sharing best practices

The partners will define the mechanisms they consider most appropriate for sharing good practices, such as networks or thematic communities to exchange ideas, resources and experiences. Institutional meetings may also be held on a regular basis,

such as conferences or joint sessions of those responsible for the programmes in each university.

Integration of best practices into the programme

As part of the review and continuous improvement process of the programmes, recognised cases of best practices will be integrated into the programmes by incorporating them into the improvement plans. The actions to be carried out to implement the improvement plans include adopting best practices in programme management, which will make it possible to achieve the desired improvements goals.

Chapter 9 Preparing and Managing External Quality Audits and Accreditation

As an external quality assurance instrument, programme accreditation aims both at assessing the study programmes' existing quality and at recommending improvements. Accountability and enhancement are at the core of the accreditation. Peer-review experts evaluate and assess the study programmes. To guarantee impartiality, the experts scrutinize the study programmes against a set of criteria. The competence of the experts in their respective field of expertise assures the quality of the external audit.

9.1 Assuring Compliance with Accreditation Assessment Criteria and Criteria for the Accreditation Process

The accreditation procedures which are described in this chapter comply with the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” (ESG), which define assessment criteria as well as criteria for the accreditation process.

Institutions offering joint programmes must demonstrate **compliance** with these standards, which include:

Internal Quality Assurance

Institutions must establish effective internal quality assurance mechanisms that continuously monitor and improve the programme's quality.

External Quality Assurance

Joint programmes are subject to external evaluations by recognized agencies to ensure they meet national and European standards.

Stakeholder Involvement

The process encourages the involvement of various stakeholders, including students, faculty, and industry representatives, to provide diverse perspectives on the programme's quality.

Usually, an accreditation process follows the structure according to the ESG and involves the following key steps:

1. **Defining Scope of Accreditation/Contract:** The HEIs and the agency define the design and scope of the study programmes' accreditation based on the criteria mentioned above and in accordance with legal requirements. (ESG 2.1, 2.2)
2. **Self-Assessment:** The HEIs submit a self-evaluation report. In addition, a site visit is conducted, which includes discussions with all relevant stakeholders, e.g. lecturers and students resulting in an assessment report by the experts with clearly defined follow-up measures. (ESG 2.3)
3. **Peer Review:** The external audit is performed as a peer-review procedure. The agency composes a group of experienced and trained experts in consensus with the HEIs. The experts are both qualified in matters of accreditation and the subject of the respective study programmes. The expert group consists typically of professors, professional practitioners and students. It may include national and/or special experts, if necessary, e.g. from national institutions of the HEI's country. (ESG 2.4)
4. **Site Visit:** The peer-review experts evaluate study programmes by pre-defined and published criteria and scientific standards. Depending on the level of compliance with these standards, experts propose conditions, recommendations and suggestions. (ESG 2.5)
5. **Assessment report:** The agency publishes the assessment report of the experts. The report includes general information about the accreditation procedure and the experts, evidence, analysis, findings, and conclusions regarding the study programmes as well as a context description of the HEI. The HEI may point out factual errors before the report is finalised. The agency supplements its appraisal to the experts' recommendations for follow-up actions based on the HEI's statement to the report. (ESG 2.6)
6. **Decision Making regarding accreditation status:** The HEI has the right to complain and appeal at any given step of the accreditation process. The HEI may object to one or more experts chosen by the agency if reasonable evidence is brought forward (e.g. suspicion of bias, conflict of interest). Finally, the HEI may appeal against the accreditation decision. The agency

takes a decision on the appeal. If the HEI does not agree with the result of this revision, it may turn to the agency. (ESG 2.7)

7. **Monitoring and Reassessment:** Accredited programmes are subject to periodic reviews to ensure ongoing compliance with quality standards.

The ESG provide a framework for quality assurance processes, which may also integrate national and/or subject-specific standards and requirements for external quality audits and accreditation (see Supplemental Documents: National Requirements for QA). Therefore, the ESG-principles are universally applicable – even outside the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Under certain circumstances, incompatibility between national standards and the ESG can occur. The peer-review experts will address this issue in the assessment report and the accreditation body will consider this when making a decision.

Certification complements the accreditation process by providing formal recognition of the programme's adherence to quality standards. This may involve:

- **Issuance of Certificates:** Upon successful accreditation, institutions receive certificates that validate the quality of their joint programmes.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Certification processes often include requirements for continuous improvement, ensuring that programmes evolve in response to changing educational needs and standards.

Accreditation and certification of joint programmes offer numerous **benefits**, including:

- **Enhanced Recognition:** Accredited programmes are more likely to be recognized by employers and other educational institutions across Europe.
- **Increased Student Confidence:** Students are more likely to enrol in programmes that have undergone rigorous accreditation processes, knowing they meet high-quality standards.
- **Facilitation of Mobility:** Accreditation supports the mobility of students and staff across borders, promoting international collaboration and exchange.

9.2 Preparation Phase and Programme Accreditation Process

Before the accreditation procedure of study programme, a preparation phase of the HEIs is necessary.

Please note that the whole accreditation procedure can take between 12 months and 24 months. It is also important to keep in mind, that the preparation phase for the HEIs before the programme accreditation procedure can take as well up to 12 months or even longer. Please contact and inform your institutional quality assurance department (see

Supplemental Document: QA Contacts on Institutional and National Level) already at an early stage of your study programme development phase, f.e. when you are conducting the Pre-Study (see Supplemental Document: Pre-Study Plan and Proposal Template) or the Planning and Proposal of the study programme (see Supplemental Document: Pre-Study Plan and Proposal Template) They can support you in the preparation phase as well as with the tasks and responsibilities in the programme accreditation procedure.

An accreditation procedure is the entire process of the accreditation from conclusion of a contract between the HEI(s) and agency to the decision about the accreditation.

For detailed planning and preparing of the accreditation process, the following chart “The Accreditation Procedure at a Glance” offers an overview on the different phases of the process as well as the parties involved with their different tasks and responsibilities.

Phases	Agency	Peer-review experts	Higher Education Institution (HEI)
Contract between HEIs and Agency			
Nomination of the peer-review experts			HEI sends preliminary information about the study pro- grammes (profile information)
	Agency appoints experts		
			HEI accepts the peer-review experts
Self-evaluation report			HEI prepares and submits self-assessment report
	Agency checks validity and completeness of the self-assessment report		
Organising the site visit	Agency accompanies and supports the HEI in organising the site visit		HEI organises the site visit in coordination with the programme manager
	Agency provides experts with the essential information and prepares them for their task		
Site visit and reporting	Agency coordinates and accompanies the site visit	Experts discuss with HEI representatives	HEI management, teaching staff, and students provide comprehensive insight in study pro-gramme(s)

		Experts compile an assessment report	
Accreditation decision			HEI gives a statement on the report – if necessary
	Accreditation body decides about the accreditation		
	Agency publishes the assessment report including the formal accreditation decision		HEI is informed about the decision and receives certificates and documents

Table 1: The Accreditation Procedure at a Glance: Phases – Involved Parties – Tasks and Responsibilities

9.3 Preparing Documentation and Evidence for External Reviews

The HEI's self-evaluation report is the basis for the evaluation of study programmes by peer experts. The self-evaluation report indicates the ways in which the programme complies with ESG standards and is the essential document for the discussions during the site visit by the peer-review experts.

The structure of the self-evaluation report should follow the ESG. If applicable, the HEI can address national criteria in the report and additional (national) criteria can be integrated in the assessment, if appropriate.

You can find the STARS EU-Template of a self-evaluation report (see Supplemental Document: Self Evaluation Report Template) as well as supporting guidelines and explanations of the assessment criteria and requirements (see Supplemental Document: Practical Guidelines Accreditation Procedure of Joint Programmes).

9.4 Outcomes of the Accreditation Procedure and Strategies for responding to Audit Findings and Recommendations

Regarding compliance of the study programme with the assessment criteria, there are different outcomes of accreditation.

In the assessment of each standard, peer experts distinguish between (full or substantial) compliance, partial compliance and non-compliance. Depending on the level of fulfilment, the procedure of study programme accreditation can have three different results:

- **Unconditional accreditation: Compliance with the standards**

The study programme fulfils all criteria of the ESG. In case of substantial compliance, the peer-review experts may express recommendations for further

improvement. These recommendations may be taken into account by the HEI with regard to the further improvement of quality.

- **Accreditation with conditions: Partial compliance with the standards**

The study programme does not completely fulfil at least one criteria of the ESG. Certain aspects must be revised to ensure compliance with the ESG standards. Unfulfilled criteria are likely to be met and must be fulfilled within the specified time period. As soon as condition(s) are fulfilled, the accreditation is granted for the complete accreditation period.

- **Refusal of accreditation: Non-compliance regarding one or more standards**

The study programme does not fulfil one or more ESG standards. Major deficiencies and weaknesses are so significant that they are unlikely to be rectifiable within a reasonable period of time. In this case, the agency refuses the accreditation.

The HEI can suspend the procedure in order to extend the timeframe for rectifying the major deficiencies.

The HEI has the right to complain and appeal during any phase of the accreditation process.

Quality assurance is a continuous process that does not end with the external feedback or report or its follow-up process within the institution. Therefore, institutions ensure that the progress made since the last external quality assurance activity is taken into consideration when preparing for the next one.

In conclusion, the accreditation and certification process for joint programmes under European standards and guidelines is essential for ensuring quality and fostering trust in higher education. By adhering to these processes, institutions can enhance the value of their programmes and contribute to the overall improvement of educational standards across Europe.

Closing Remarks and Outcomes

In the 2017 Conference "Higher Education for Diversity, Social Inclusion, and Community: A Democratic Imperative" in Rome, was stated the following:

“Democracy faces serious challenges, including mistrust of democratic institutions, increasing political, educational, and economic inequalities, alienation, rising intolerance, and rejection of cultural diversity. Higher education must play an essential role in building a culture of democracy based on furthering inclusion, recognising the value of diversity, and fostering democratic communities.”¹⁷

This is why STARS EU was formed, designing joint programmes aligned with the European Guidelines including Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policies. THE STARS EU Alliance promotes European exchange by realising a vast set of mobility activities like short courses, language courses, MOOCs, BIPs, COILs, Summer/Winter schools, civic engagement activities, volunteering, living labs, to raise the participation and engagement in these relevant areas. And will continue expanding these offers.

The handbook is intended to be a guideline for all participants of the STARS EU community and beyond. It is a dynamic document, open to changes and modifications as a result of its application. The intention is that quality assurance should be seen as something intrinsic and necessary for the prestige of the academic offer of the STARS EU alliance, and not as a formal procedure that needs to be attended to as part of the process of creating joint training programmes.

To achieve trust as higher education institutions, it is necessary to guarantee the quality of the academic activities we develop and to apply a policy of continuous improvement in our performance.

In this sense, through feedback from the different groups involved in the application of this handbook, in particular from external bodies such as quality assessment agencies, it is hoped that it will be enriched and improved in order to fulfil the purpose for which it was designed.

¹⁷ For more information on the Conference "Higher Education for Diversity, Social Inclusion, and Community: A Democratic Imperative" in Rome (2017) please see: [https://www.coe.int/en/web/higher-education-and-research/democratic-mission-of-higher-education#{%2234135905%22:\[0\]}](https://www.coe.int/en/web/higher-education-and-research/democratic-mission-of-higher-education#{%2234135905%22:[0]})

Annex

Document 1: Programme or Course Planning Matrix

Learning objectives/ outcomes	Content	Teaching and learning methodologies	Assessment tools
Cognitive field ("Knowledge")	Academic knowledge – A	Characterization of the pedagogical model, including activities to be performed, how the various activities will be integrated, and the responsibilities of teaching staff, students and other participants in the dynamics of teaching and learning.	Indicate ways to guarantee that the assessment of student learning will be based on the learning objectives/outcomes. Indication of the existing mechanisms for monitoring the academic success of students.
Psychomotor field ("Know how to do")	Academic skills and personal skills – B		
Affective field ("Know how to be")	= A+B	Identification of working tools used for sharing information and interaction, as well as how students will access these tools. Indication of the strategies defined to ensure the Alignment between teaching and learning methodologies and the learning outcomes	Mechanisms adopted to ensure the fairness, liability, and accessibility of the assessment procedures.
Mechanisms available to verify that the average workload assigned to students corresponds to the number of ETCS credits set for the course/programme.			

Document 2: European Criteria and EQF Levels

European criteria for Transnational programme organization and management		EQF Levels
Higher education institutions involved	The joint programme is offered by at least 2 higher education institutions from at least 2 different Member States.	6, 7, 8
Transnational joint degree delivery	The joint programme is jointly designed and jointly delivered by all the higher education institutions involved.	6, 7, 8
	The joint programme leads to the award of a joint degree.	6, 7, 8
	A joint Diploma Supplement is issued to students.	6, 7
	The joint programme describes the learning outcomes and credits in line with the ECTS Users Guide.	6, 7
Joint arrangements for the joint programme	The joint programme has joint policies, procedures and/or arrangements defining curriculum planning and delivery, as well as all organisational and administrative matters. Students' representatives are part of the decision- making process to define the joint policies and procedures and/or arrangements.	6, 7, 8
Quality assurance arrangements	Internal and external Quality Assurance is conducted under the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). An EQAR-registered agency evaluates the higher education institutions, the study field, or the programme.	6, 7, 8
	The joint programme is evaluated using the standards of the European approach for quality assurance of joint programme (EA).	6, 7, 8
Graduate tracking	The joint programme monitors graduates through a graduate tracking system.	6, 7, 8

European criteria for Learning experience		EQF Levels
Student-centred learning	The joint programme is designed and continuously enhanced and delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in the learning process. Assessment of students reflects this approach.	6, 7, 8

Interdisciplinarity	The joint programme includes embedded interdisciplinarity components.	6, 7, 8
Labour market relevance	The joint programme aligns with labour market requirements by incorporating intersectoral components or activities and developing transversal skills.	6, 7, 8
Digital skills	The joint programme includes components and actions related to the development of students' advanced digital skills, tailored to the capacities and circumstances of the joint programme, ensuring alignment with its scope and scholarly focus.	6, 7, 8
Transnational campus – access to services	The programme has joint policies for students and staff to access relevant services in all participating higher educational institutions under equivalent conditions as all enrolled students and local staff.	6, 7, 8
Flexible and embedded student mobility	The joint programme offers deep intercultural experience, including a minimum of 1 period of student physical mobility (that can be split in several stays) at one or more partner institution(s) representing overall at least 60 ECTS at EQF 6 level and 30 ECTS at EQF 7 level. The joint programme has a policy offering alternatives for students who are unable to travel.	6, 7
	The joint programme offers deep intercultural experience, including a total of at least 6 months of physical mobility at one or more partner institution(s).	8
Co-evaluation and co-supervision for dissertations	Dissertations are supervised by at least 2 supervisors and co-evaluated by co-supervisors or a committee with members from at least 2 different institutions located in 2 different countries.	8

European criteria for European Values		EQF Levels
Democratic values	The joint programme's joint policies promote and adhere to democratic values.	6, 7, 8
Multilingualism	Each student is exposed to at least 2 different EU languages during the joint programme.	6, 7, 8
Inclusiveness	The joint programme commits to wide participation by fostering diversity, equality, and inclusion and by	6, 7, 8

	adopting tailored measures to support students and staff with fewer opportunities.	
	The joint programme commits to respect the principles of the European Charter for Researchers.	8
Green transition	The joint programme has policies and actions related to environmental sustainability and implements measures to minimise the environmental footprint of its activities.	6, 7, 8

Document 3: Mobility Activities

Student mobility		
Activity	Definition	Form of mobility
Study abroad	Long- or short-term mobility under Erasmus or other formats, including curricular student projects, thesis, summer/winter schools or similar activities.	Physical: Students travel abroad for a long-term or short-term study stay at STARS EU partner university. Virtual: Courses such as COILs or projects conducted entirely online by a STARS EU partner university teacher. Blended: A combination of virtual and physical presence, e.g., Erasmus Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), where some studies are online, and others are conducted onsite abroad.
Hybrid module/course	A course in which some students attend lectures or seminars in person while others participate virtually from home.	Students from the home university: physical. Students from universities: virtual.
BIPs for students	The programme connects at least three higher education institutions from three different Erasmus+ Programme countries. Participants can be students from all study cycles and academic and administrative staff.	It includes a combination of physical mobility lasting 5–30 days and a virtual component.
Internships of students or recent graduates	Internships under Erasmus or other programmes, either short- or long-term. Collaboration between students, researchers, staff, mentors/company	Physical: On-site presence. Virtual: Internships are conducted entirely online, allowing participants to collaborate with mentors,

	representatives or associated universities in a problem-based initiative or work on joint projects.	company representatives, or partner universities remotely. Blended: Parts of the internship are conducted online (either in the home country or abroad), and other parts are on-site.
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Staff mobility		
Activity	Definition	Form of mobility
Guest lectures	Teaching mobility or similar formats involving at least 2 hours (90 minutes) of lectures.	Physical: an academic from a STARS EU university gives a lecture to students from at least one of the other universities in the alliance (guest university). The teacher physically participates in the guest university classroom. Virtual: an academic from a STARS EU university gives a lecture to students from one of the other universities in the alliance (guest university). The lecture is realized online, i.e. both the teacher and students are at their home university having the lecture online. Blended: A combination of physical and virtual parts, i.e. part of the lecture is realized physically, and part is realized virtually.
Staff Week	A minimum three-day event featuring seminars, workshops, presentations, and active participation by academic	Physical: On-site participation. Virtual: Online format.

	<p>and/or non- academic staff.</p> <p>The purpose is to enable multilateral and intercultural exchange of know-how, expertise, best practices, and networking.</p> <p>For virtual staff weeks, at least one meeting per day (90 minutes) is recommended.</p>	<p>Blended: A combination of both formats (e.g., Erasmus BIP for staff).</p>
Joint research project	<p>A Joint Research Project is a collaborative initiative between two or more entities (academic institutions, research centers, government organizations or private companies) to carry out scientific or technological research activities with common objectives.</p> <p>Joint Research Projects promote interdisciplinarity and knowledge exchange, benefiting from the complementary skills of each partner. They are often funded to foster innovation and solve complex scientific and societal challenges.</p>	<p>Physical short- or long-term mobility.</p> <p>Virtual exchange.</p>

Other Mobility Opportunities		
Activity	Definition	Form of mobility
Joint Project Meetings	<p>Joint meetings of researchers and/or other staff focused on preparing or realising joint collaborative projects. The meetings facilitate exchange and the development of shared goals. Meetings within Thematic Interest Groups (TIGs), work packages (WP Tasks), or structural tasks.</p>	<p>Physical: on-site meeting of the project team for at least 2 hours (90 minutes).</p> <p>Virtual: on-line session of project team for at least 2 hours (90 minutes).</p> <p>Blended: a combination of on- site and online meetings.</p>

STARS Talks	<p>Open seminars, where knowledge and initiatives to support the development of our regions are focused in different ways.</p> <p>The alliance created STARS Talks to facilitate knowledge sharing and interaction by all relevant and interested actors.</p>	Short monthly webinars hosted by the STARS EU Challenge lab structures.
Staff workshops	<p>Staff workshops involve seminars, training sessions, and other collaborative activities for staff development. These workshops aim to enhance skills, share best practices, and foster collaboration among staff members from different institutions or organizations.</p>	<p>Physical: on-site meeting of the project team for at least 2 hours (90 minutes).</p> <p>Virtual: on-line session of project team for at least 2 hours (90 minutes).</p> <p>Blended: a combination of on- site and online meetings.</p>
Bilateral visits	<p>Bilateral visits are short-term exchanges between university representatives, staff members or researchers from two institutions to discuss specific projects, foster collaborations, or exchange knowledge and expertise.</p>	<p>Physical: on-site project team meeting for at least 2 hours (90 minutes).</p> <p>Virtual: The project team will have an online session for at least 2 hours (90 minutes).</p> <p>Blended: a combination of on- site and online meetings.</p>
Conferences / Symposiums/ Summits	<p>Conferences, Symposiums and Summits are formal gatherings of professionals or academics to present research, exchange ideas, and discuss field developments. These may include plenary sessions, workshops, and networking opportunities.</p>	<p>Physical: on-site project team meeting for at least 2 hours (90 minutes).</p> <p>Virtual: The project team will have an online session for at least 2 hours (90 minutes).</p>

		Blended: a combination of on- site and online meetings.
Hackathon	An intensive, collaborative event, usually lasting 24 to 72 hours, where students, programmers, designers, project managers and others come together to develop innovative solutions, such as software, applications or technological prototypes, around a theme or specific challenge.	Virtual: conducted entirely online.

Document 4: ESG Standards

Joint programmes must implement suitable and sustainable internal and external quality assurance processes, which include regular programme evaluations, integrating stakeholder feedback and adherence to accreditation requirements. Continuous improvement mechanisms should be implemented which address identified areas for enhancement and improvement.

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” (ESG), which emphasize the importance of quality assurance in higher education, represent the essential basis for quality assurance covering three areas: internal quality assurance, external quality assurance and quality assurance agencies. While part 1 describes the standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, part 2 defines the approach of the external quality assurance and is therefore relevant for international programme accreditation procedures. Part 3 specifies the standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies.

Therefore, the structure of the STARS EU Handbook of Quality Assurance refers to the ten ESG criteria which are relevant for internal quality assurance of study programmes:

- ESG Standard 1.1 – Policy for quality assurance
- ESG Standard 1.2 – Design and approval of programmes
- ESG Standard 1.3 – Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment
- ESG Standard 1.4 – Student admission, progression, recognition and certification
- ESG Standard 1.5 – Teaching staff
- ESG Standard 1.6 – Learning resources and student support
- ESG Standard 1.7 – Information management
- ESG Standard 1.8 – Public information
- ESG Standard 1.9 – On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes
- ESG Standard 1.10 – Cyclical external quality assurance

The currently valid version of the ESG (including additional information and supplementing commentaries) is available in several languages on the website of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)¹⁸

Joint programmes, which involve collaboration between multiple higher education institutions, must align their quality assurance processes with the ESG to ensure consistency and transparency across all partner institutions. This alignment not only

¹⁸ www.enqa.eu.

enhances the credibility of the joint programme but also fosters trust among stakeholders, including students, faculty, and external bodies.

Key aspects of compliance include:

Quality Assurance Policies

Institutions must develop and implement clear quality assurance policies that reflect the principles outlined in the ESG. This includes establishing mechanisms for regular review and improvement of the joint programme.

Stakeholder Involvement

Engaging stakeholders, including students, faculty, and industry representatives, is crucial for gathering feedback and ensuring that the programme meets the needs of all parties involved. This participatory approach is emphasized in the ESG means to enhance quality.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the joint programme are necessary to assess its effectiveness and impact. Institutions should employ both internal and external evaluation methods to ensure compliance with quality standards.

Transparency and Accountability

Institutions must maintain transparency in their quality assurance processes, providing clear information about the programme's objectives, outcomes, and quality assurance measures. This transparency is vital for accountability to stakeholders and regulatory bodies.

External Reviews

Engaging in periodic external reviews by recognized quality assurance agencies is a critical component of compliance. These reviews provide an objective assessment of the programme's quality and help identify areas for improvement.

Accreditation and certification

The accreditation and certification process for joint programmes within the European context is guided by a robust quality framework that aligns with established European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). This framework ensures that joint programmes meet high educational standards and are recognized across member states. Accreditation serves as a formal recognition that a joint programme meets specific quality criteria set by relevant authorities.

Certification, on the other hand, verifies that the programme adheres to these standards throughout its implementation. Together, they enhance the credibility and transparency of joint programmes, fostering trust among stakeholders, including students, employers, and academic institutions.

By adhering to these principles and ensuring compliance with the ESG, joint programmes can enhance their quality assurance frameworks, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes and greater recognition within the European Higher Education Area.