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*“The Big Bang Theory:
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Joint accreditation: a new frontier for quality assurance

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Abstract

The paper explores Joint Accreditation (JA) as a quality assurance (QA) instrument that involves collaboration between two or more organisations in different countries, joining their resources and expertise to evaluate study programmes and higher education institutions (HEIs) against international standards. This paper particularly focuses on the cases of joint accreditation carried out jointly by domestic and foreign QA agencies and addresses the growing complexity of modern higher education, which increasingly features cultural, transnational, and multi-institutional initiatives.

A significant part of the study is dedicated to a mixed-methods analysis of JA's practical value. We present the findings of an original survey distributed to QA agencies and HEIs' representatives globally, investigating their perceptions, perceived benefits, and operational hurdles related to JA. These survey results are critically examined alongside the documented experience of the National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA), offering a grounded and practical perspective on JA implementation.

Keywords: joint accreditation, quality assurance, higher education, global collaboration, survey, international benchmarking.

1. Introduction

Global challenges of the modern day confront everyone involved in higher education, including changing structure of qualifications and the labour market, global warming, climate change, and rapid advancement in artificial intelligence technology. Most of these serious global problems cannot be attributed to a certain geographical location. The efforts of one country are not enough and it is only through collaboration that these problems can be

solved. Many challenges have been formed also in QA for the last years and they predominantly focus on the following key domains.

Firstly, a central question within academic and professional communities concerns the fundamental approaches to QA governance (state regulation, market competition of accreditation agencies, self-regulation), contrasting state-controlled models with those promoting accreditation agency competition or institutional autonomy. It further analyzes the spectrum of centralized versus decentralized system architectures and the resulting balance of power between state and non-state actors.

Secondly, scholars and policymakers are critically examining the dynamics of quality assurance in an international context and international recognition (Zhang and Patil 2017, 60–62). This involves analysing two interconnected phenomena: first, the limitations and mechanisms of cross-border recognition of national accreditation outcomes, and second, the influence of international standards on the development of the national accreditation systems.

Thirdly, the impact of accreditation on the labour market that investigates the correlation between accreditation status and the development of competitive, employable graduates, including potential effects on graduate remuneration. The academic and professional communities are considering such questions as: how effectively does accreditation contribute to the training of competitive specialists in demand on the labor market? Is there a correlation between accreditation and the level of graduates' salaries?

Fourthly, modernizing evaluation criteria to address emergent educational forms and technological shifts, such as micro-credentials, online and blended education, digital transformation, artificial intelligence vs. academic integrity, etc.

Given the significant role that QA plays in higher education, the academic and expert communities move to new QA models and strategies, such as:

- Innovation and digitalization in QA. Involvement of IT-proficient academic experts, development and implementation of innovative assessment methods, supported by digital platforms, open data bases and stakeholders' feedback,
- A variety of approaches. Respect for autonomy of HEIs and individual approach in education, focus on mission and learning outcomes, a tailor-made «soft» QA methodology as a «smart» external review can be suggested as an alternative to traditional accreditation,
- Trust and honesty. Commitment to academic integrity in the era of AI to prioritise human decision-making, develop ethical norms and values for AI application and protection of personal information, on the one hand, and transparency, publicity, and reliability of external reviews, on the other hand.

2. Joint accreditation: global insights and NCPA experience

This section presents a comparative analysis of JA implementations across different global contexts, highlighting varying objectives, operational frameworks, and persistent challenges. Joint accreditation has emerged as a progressive QA model that was designed to evaluate HEIs and study programmes, joining the efforts of several accrediting bodies. The landscape of quality assurance is characterized by distinct accreditation models which include:

- National accreditation, which typically involves domestic experts applying nationally defined standards;
- International Accreditation, which involves international experts and benchmarks study programmes against global or cross-border standards;
- Joint Accreditation, a collaborative model where domestic and foreign agencies conduct a unified review but render independent, parallel decisions on study programmes.

The Asia-Pacific Region: multinational case

A collaborative initiative began in 2018 between the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA) and the Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association (TWAEA), later expanding to include agencies from Thailand (ONESQA) and Mongolia (MNCEA). This consortium developed a shared handbook (International Joint Accreditation Project 2021) and designed TWAEA International Pilot Platform (TWAEA n.d.), integrating their respective frameworks to create synergies and exchange evaluation expertise.

Separately, HEEACT and Australia's International Centre of Excellence (THE-ICE) developed a JA model for cross-border education between Taiwan and Australia. This project is viewed as a pilot for investigating the feasibility of a broader cross-border review model by examining the alignment of accreditation mechanisms and standards (HEEACT n.d.).

QA bodies from geographically and culturally diverse countries collectively developed the technology to evaluate and recognize study programmes and educational quality across borders. This collaborative endeavor represents a paradigm shift from isolated, nationally focused quality assurance towards a more integrated global framework. This JA model covers standardized frameworks, joint review panels, mutual recognition agreements and shared digital platforms, promoting the continuous exchange of best practices and evaluation techniques. For higher education institutions, it provides a clear and efficient pathway to demonstrate their international standing. For students and employers, it offers a trusted, multi-source validation of qualifications, enhancing their portability and relevance in the global labour market. Thus, this collaboratively designed JA model does not just assess quality, but actively constructs and reinforces an interconnected ecosystem of global higher education.

The European JA Approach

Within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), JA was formalized through the “European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes,” endorsed by the ministers in 2015 during the Erevan conference. This framework established nine specific standards (Eligibility; Learning Outcomes; Study Programme; Admission and Recognition; Learning, Teaching and Assessment; Student Support; Resources; Transparency and Documentation; and Quality Assurance) and procedures derived from the agreed-upon tools of the European Higher Education Area to facilitate the accreditation of integrated joint degrees (Frederiks et al. 2012).

The United States: A Unified JA Model for Continuing Professional Development

In the United States, the Joint Accreditation for Interprofessional Continuing Education (IPCE) represents a pioneering JA model within the health professions. This initiative consolidates ten accrediting bodies under a single set of standards, a unified application process, and common fee structures. The primary objective is to enable educational institutions to offer continuing education credits simultaneously to a diverse range of healthcare professionals, including physicians, pharmacists, nurses, and psychologists, without requiring separate, profession-specific accreditations (Joint Accreditation for Interprofessional Continuing Education n.d.). The framework is built upon twelve core criteria addressing mission, program improvement, and activity integrity. Successful providers receive a distinctive JA Provider Mark and are listed in a central database, enhancing their visibility and credibility.

The NCPA Experience: A Decade of Bilateral Collaboration

The National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA) provides a robust case study of sustained bilateral joint accreditation. Since 2015, NCPA has collaborated with eight QA agencies from six countries. A cornerstone of this effort is the long-term partnership with EQEA (China), through which 89 programmes across 8 Russian and 5 Chinese universities have been jointly accredited (Motova and Tanikova 2024).

The established procedure involves a formal bilateral agreement between agencies, coordination and harmonization of standards, methodological support for the participating HEIs, a unified self-evaluation report followed by a three-day site visit by a joint review panel, an unified external review report, and parallel decisions on study programmes.

The key differences from the national accreditation are: 1) the review panel usually consists of national experts and international experts nominated by partner agency, employers and students. The quantity of experts is agreed and depends on the project, but in case of JA of the medical programmes the review panel can include even up to 10

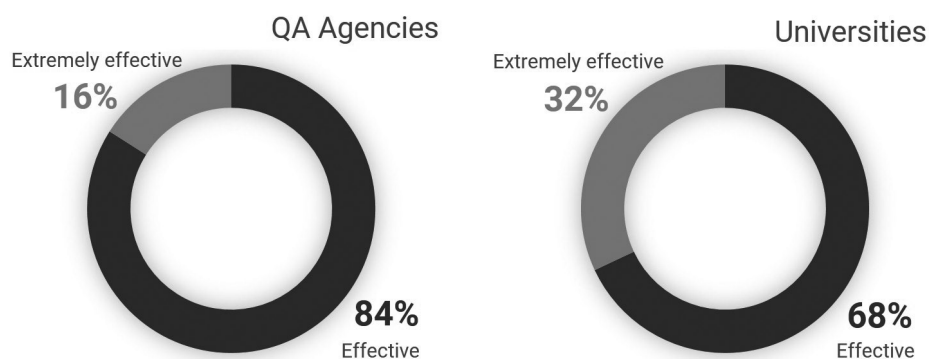
experts; 2) it takes longer time to prepare for JA and it involves extensive preliminary work, bilateral agreements and detailed account of all procedural issues; 3) one single self-evaluation report and final report is prepared, but 2 or more independent decisions.

3. Survey Results: Perceived Effectiveness, Benefits, and Challenges of Joint Accreditation

Methodology and respondent profile: a survey was conducted to evaluate the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding joint accreditation. The respondent pool consisted of two distinct cohorts: six QA agencies and twenty-five representatives from higher education institutions. The survey was designed to investigate five key thematic areas concerning the effectiveness, benefits, and challenges of JA.

When asked to compare the effectiveness of JA involving two agencies to single-agency accreditation, respondents expressed overwhelmingly positive views. Among QA agencies, 84% found JA “effective” and 16% deemed it “extremely effective.” Similarly, among HEI representatives, 68% considered it “effective” and 32% “extremely effective” (Pic.1). Notably, no respondent from either group provided a negative assessment, indicating a strong consensus on the utility of the JA model.

The next survey question was devoted to the key benefits of joint accreditation. Like any other evaluations, joint accreditation is significant for HEIs and QA agencies in different ways. The analysis of 241 qualitative responses covered five areas for QA agencies and six areas for HEIs as a result. For QA agencies, the benefits of JA are predominantly meta-evaluative, enhancing the agencies’ own operational frameworks and strategic positioning. QA agencies highlighted a number of benefits that can be grouped. Firstly, while preparing for JA, QA agencies from both sides learn a lot and understand advantages and disadvantages of international higher education environment. JA gives opportunities to share experience,



Pic.1: Distribution of answers to question «How effective do you consider the process of JA involving 2 agencies to be compared to accreditation by a single agency?»

develop educational and scientific links, learn best practices and enhance. Secondly, the benefits are about recognition of the universities globally and strengthening of the international cooperation, that contributes to the integration into the global educational environment. Thirdly, QA agencies emphasized the synergy of expertise. Each agency brings its own unique experience and this is especially valuable for self-learning and enhancement. Fourthly, JA is about the comprehensiveness of analysis. Combining different methodological approaches allows for a more detailed assessment, covering all aspects of activities, including cultural and national peculiarities. Fifthly, reducing the administrative burden on HEIs. Combining efforts of two agencies in one accreditation procedure allows universities to reduce the time and costs of preparing for accreditation, especially if we deal with several expert group at once (for example, when 10 expert groups work simultaneously).

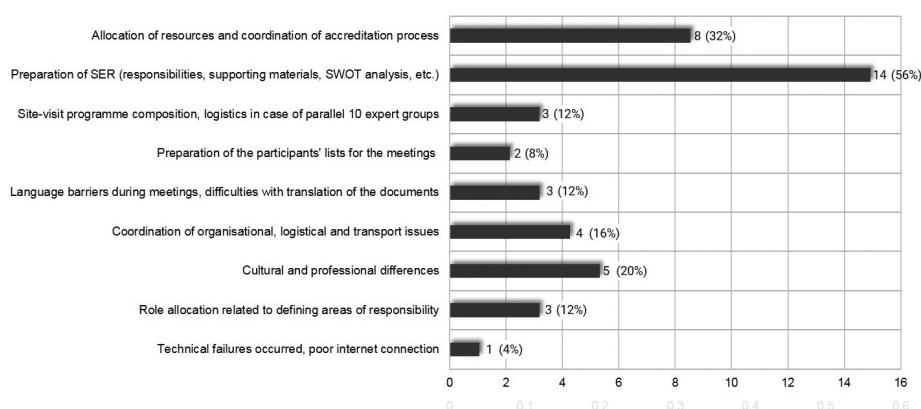
For HEIs, the benefits of JA are more directly aligned with institutional strategy, reputation, and quality improvement. They identified six primary benefit areas: reputation, exchange component, new opportunities, increasing the level of expertise and trust, competition and improvement or enhancement component. Notable specific comments from HEIs included the practical advantage of producing bilingual accreditation documents for marketing purposes, the elimination of the need for sequential national and international accreditations, and the expanded organizational flexibility when accreditation certificates have differing validity periods.

The implementation of joint accreditation, while beneficial, is fraught with significant operational and methodological challenges. QA agency representatives were asked to be more precised in Question 3 and put in order of importance 10 challenges they faced during JA. The ranked difficulties reported by QA agencies reveal that the primary hurdles are not merely logistical but are fundamentally rooted in the complex task of harmonizing disparate quality assurance systems into a coherent and legitimate joint process. The top-ranked challenges – Harmonisation of common standards and criteria (1), Balancing national and international requirements (2), Development of a unified methodological framework (3), and Harmonisation of assessment methods (4) - collectively represent the foundational work of JA. This indicates that the most significant effort lies in the pre accreditation phase, where agencies must negotiate a shared understanding of “quality”. The subsequent cluster of challenges - Conflict management and decision making (5), Allocation and coordination of resources (6), and Harmonisation of reporting formats (7) - shifts focus from what to evaluate to how to manage the evaluation. These points highlight the governance vacuum that can emerge in a collaborative model. The lower-ranked, though still critical, challenges—Selection of experts (8), Language difficulties (9), and Harmonisation of requirements for Accreditation Council materials (10) - pertain to the practical execution of the agreed-upon framework. The fact that these are ranked lower suggests they are

perceived as surmountable with careful planning. However, the selection of experts (8) remains a key concern, as it requires identifying specialists who are not merely subject-matter experts but also possess the intercultural competence and flexibility to operate within a hybrid methodology. Language barriers (9) extend beyond simple translation to encompass the nuanced interpretation of academic standards and evidence.

The survey results from HEIs reveal that the primary challenges of joint accreditation are not strategic, but operational and procedural. The data indicates a significant burden placed on institutional capacity, with the difficulties centering on the internal management of the JA process rather than a skepticism of its value (Pic.2).

The majority of respondents (56%) highlighted preparation of the self-evaluation reports (allocation of responsibilities, preparation of supporting materials, annexes to the report, etc.). This goes beyond the standard effort required for a national accreditation. For JA, the SER must simultaneously address the distinct standards and criteria of two accreditation agencies. The difficulty lies in the “allocation of responsibilities, preparation of supporting materials, and annexes,” which suggests a complex internal coordination effort to combine evidence into a single, coherent document that satisfies two different evaluative frameworks. The second major challenge (32%) was the allocation of human, time, and financial resources, and the coordination of the overall process. This underscores that JA is perceived as more resource-intensive than conventional accreditation. It requires dedicated project management to align internal schedules with the timelines of two external agencies, often involving additional costs for translation, travel, and dedicated administrative staff. A notable proportion of respondents (20%) emphasized challenges related to cultural and professional differences. A cluster of lower-ranked but consistent challenges involved the practical implementation of the JA process. This includes coordinating complex site-visit

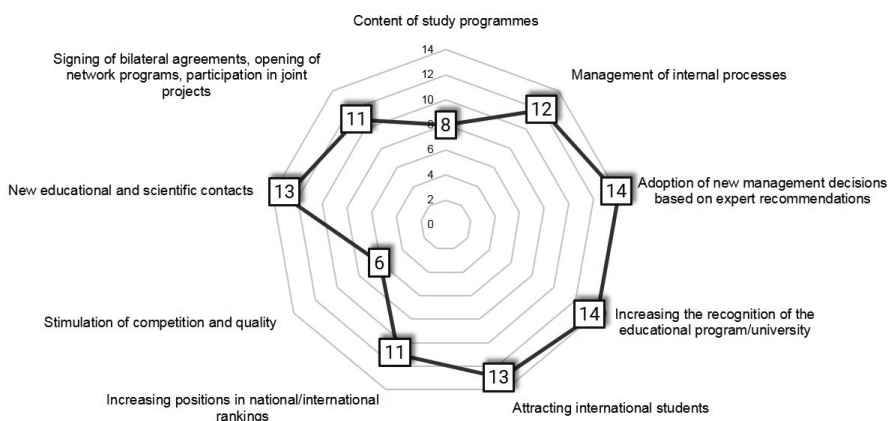


Pic.2: Distribution of QA agencies' answers to question «What challenges have you encountered during joint accreditation?»

programme (16%), managing the logistics of parallel external review panels (12%), and overcoming language barriers during meetings and in document translation (12%). While these challenges are often considered surmountable, their combined mention indicates the increased operational complexity of conducting JA compared to a national one. Minor mentions of technical issues, such as poor internet, further illustrate how JA amplifies the potential for logistical failures.

The next question of the survey was «Has JA affected the quality of your Internal Quality Assurance processes? In what way?». The survey data reveals a unanimous consensus both among QA agencies and HEIs that JA has a transformative impact on Internal Quality Assurance processes. The 100% affirmative response rate underscores that JA acts as a powerful catalyst for quality enhancement, moving beyond a mere compliance to become a driver of systematic internal improvement.

A significant outcome of JA is the direct optimization of the technical infrastructure and methodologies of quality assurance. QA agencies reported specific improvements in their operational work, including optimization of the methodological framework, development of analytical approaches, reduced risk of duplication of functions and increased efficiency of processes. Beyond procedural changes, JA induces a deeper, cultural shift within organizations, fostering a more reflective and proactive quality culture. For QA agencies, JA serves as an advanced professional development exercise for their staff and expert pool. The collaborative and comparative nature of JA also instills a powerful motivation for ongoing self-improvement. The process acts as a benchmark, revealing best practices and innovative approaches that the agency can then improve. The requirement to operate transparently with an external partner agency reinforces the importance of clarity and openness in all processes.



Pic.3: Distribution of HEIs' answers to question «What challenges have you encountered during joint accreditation?»

The analysis of 119 qualitative responses from HEIs demonstrates that JA provides a tangible impetus for both internal improvement, directly affecting academic and administrative core functions, and external standing and competitive positioning of the universities. We have grouped the answers into nine main areas. Fourteen respondents highlighted adoption of new management decisions that are based on experts recommendations and increasing the recognition of study programmes or university. Thirteen respondents indicated attracting international students and new educational and scientific contacts. Twelve respondents highlighted influence on IQA. Then eleven respondents noted the impact on the increasing positions in the national and international rankings, and cooperation, participation in joint projects, signing of bilateral agreements etc. Eight respondents answered that JA affected the content of study programmes and six respondents emphasized stimulation of competition and quality.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study, encompassing global case analysis and stakeholder surveys, affirm that JA has matured into a robust and demonstrably effective model for quality assurance in an increasingly interconnected higher education landscape. While the implementation of JA is undeniably resource-intensive, demanding significant investments of time, expertise, and diplomatic effort to harmonize standards and methodologies, its strategic value far outweighs these initial costs.

JA is not a static QA model, it is a dynamically evolving practice. As evidenced by its spread across the continents from the unified frameworks in the United States and Europe to the burgeoning multilateral partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region, JA is continuously adapting to new educational formats and global challenges.

Ultimately, joint accreditation goes beyond its primary function of quality assurance. It serves as a powerful practical tool for fostering international trust, enhancing institutional reputation, and facilitating academic mobility. For universities, it provides a credible pathway to global recognition and a catalyst for internal quality enhancement. For QA agencies, it represents a vital mechanism for professional development and systemic learning. Therefore, despite its complexities, JA stands as an indispensable and practical strategy for HEIs seeking to confirm their quality and solidify their standing within the global academic community.

The paper may be of interest to universities that deliver joint programmes, national QA agencies, government bodies, and experts responsible for QA.

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