
Support services related to the Quality of ERASMUS MUNDUS Master Courses and the preparation of quality guidelines

DGEAC Contract 2007-3736/001-001 MUN MUNETU
(January 2008 to December 2008)

Executive Summary

December 2008

ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd

Vincent House,
Quay Place, 92-93 Edward Street
Birmingham B1 2RA
United Kingdom

T +44 845 313 7455

F +44 845 313 7454

www.ecotec.com

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ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd

Avenue de Tervuren 13 A
B-1040 Brussels
Belgium

T: +32 (0)2 743 8949

F: +32 (0)2 732 7111

E: brussels@ecotec.com

Website: www.ecotec.com

Contents

1	Executive Summary.....	1
1.1	Objective.....	1
1.2	The Erasmus Mundus Courses	2
1.3	The Components of Excellence.....	3
1.4	Visualising and Representing the Components.....	4
1.5	Conclusions	5

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Objective

"The objective of this assignment is to carry out an in-depth study of the effectiveness of 6 Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses, aiming at deriving good practice that will be formalised in a handbook with the purpose of supporting and improving the quality of the organisation and implementation of highly integrated masters courses and thus their effectiveness."

To meet that objective we understood that the primary task of the work was to facilitate a process that would enable the client to capture, explore and disseminate a view of good practice in the sphere of quality assurance as applied to Erasmus Mundus MA courses. We were clear that the task was *not to carry out* quality assurance per se, but to extract and evaluate the lessons of good practice from those in the field who; have a duty to carry out such work; have a strategic view of its importance and have a research interest. But the most important contributions will come from those who have a genuine desire to be better at what they do.

The key activity was then to recover what was deemed to be good practice from the learned experience of teachers, learners and administrators across those courses pre-selected by the Commission for us to look at. The overall objectives for the project as set out in the ToR required the following broad actions:

- To identify the characteristics of excellence and innovation in quality and in the processes of quality assurance across the self-selected sample of Master programmes;
- To identify the components of an inventory of best practice in delivering such courses and in maintaining quality assurance; to capture learning from the inventory on how to overcome obstacles and provide working solutions to key issues;
- To prepare a Web-based Handbook tool to assist existing Masters courses in achieving the excellence standards of the best, and to offer both an inventory of good practices and a set of clear guidelines and recommendations.

1.2 The Erasmus Mundus Courses

The recovery of good practice was undertaken through a series of 18 visits to six Erasmus Mundus courses. A Call for voluntary participation by Erasmus Mundus courses in this exercise was launched by DGEAC. In selecting the courses to be the subject for the study ECOTEC was provided with a list of six courses, selected by the Steering Group from 24 (nearly 40% of all courses) positive expressions of interest. Each of the courses selected for the project were mandated to have at least three partners in other countries (though many were much more broadly based). The participating institutions visited during the project were:

NOHA MUNDUS - European Master's Degree in International Humanitarian Aid

- Univ. de Deusto Spain
- University of Groningen, Netherlands
- University College Dublin, Ireland

MESPOM Master of Environmental Sciences, Policy and Management

- Int. Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics, Lund, Sweden
- Central European university-Dept. of Environmental Sciences, Policy and Management Hungary
- University of Manchester - School of Earth, Atmospheric and Environmental Sciences, UK

MERIT European Master of Research on Information and Communication Technologies

- Univ. Politecnica de Cataluña, Spain
- Technical University of Turin, Italy
- Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium

AMASE - Master Programme in Advanced Materials Science & Engineering

- Univ. Saarlander, Saarbrücken, Germany
- Institut National Polytechnique de Lorraine (INPL) National Polytechnic Institute of Lorraine Nancy, France
- Luleå University of Technology Luleå, Sweden

TROPED - Science Programme in International Health

- Univs. Institute of Tropical Medicine Berlin, Germany
- University of Copenhagen, Denmark
- Royal Tropical Institute, Vrije University Amsterdam, the Netherlands

CODE - Joint European Master in Comparative Local Development

- Trento University, Italy
- Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary
- University of Regensburg, Germany

The core team for each visit comprised two staff from Ecotec, one who focused on the quality of structure and processes in the context of pan-European 'jointness' (ideally to confirm the documentary evidence of good practice and effective processes, and covering areas such as learning and teaching processes, assessment, and the available teaching infrastructure and resources), and the second focused on the quality outcomes and impacts (including the student experience, impacts on research and teaching developments etc.).

There normally was also an external subject specialist who has the pedagogic knowledge of the course subject areas, focusing on the quality of the curriculum and its linkage to the quality of teaching and learning. The group of experts was identified by the Executive Agency from those who had participated in evaluation tasks. ECOTEC subsequently invited them to participate in the visits. Members of staff from DGEAC and the Executive Agency (EACEA) participated in most of the visits. The relevant national Quality Assurance Agency was invited to participate in visits.

The Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association, and the European Students Union were asked to propose student representatives who accompanied us on almost all visits. The role of the student member was to provide a cross-cutting perspective on all the visit activities. Therefore students had the ability to participate in their own mix of activities.

1.3 The Components of Excellence

During each of the visits the Course teams contributed significant amounts of time, and spoke openly and constructively about the challenges they had experienced when building their courses. The students on the course also contributed their experiences as consumers of the courses, and the rich material that has been gathered is testimony to the professionalism with which course teams participated in this exercise. The material that was recovered from the visits, and the self-assessments by the courses, was structured into four main Components of Excellence when building, developing and sustaining a successful Erasmus Mundus Course.

The first component is **Facilities, Logistics and Finance** (the mnemonic for this is FLAF). In a highly competitive global education marketplace, students with the right competences need to be attracted and the Course needs to verify that their qualifications are legitimate and are suited to the Course needs. Having attracted students to apply, their applications need to be treated efficiently and effectively, and communication with the students should keep them informed of the progress of their application. When offered a place on the Course they should be prepared in advance for the move to Europe; for the culture they will live in and for the academic environment within which they will work. Since the students will move between partner institutions during their studies, the Course will need to maintain efficient and coherent communication with them. When they graduate from the course the students become the Alumni and will be part of a growing community of support and advice back to the Courses.

The second component concerns the special set of leadership, management and academic expertise that is needed to build the complex and challenging Erasmus Mundus Courses. This is **Quality of Leadership and Institutions** (QUIL). The Course should attract the highest quality academic staff, because the students coming from Third Countries often are themselves of the highest calibre. Excellent staff and an excellent curriculum will attract excellent students. This cannot be achieved just within an academic department framework. The commitment of both the Institutions and their senior staff is important. Associated with that, there is the need to show clearly that the Erasmus Mundus Course contributes to the research and teaching strategies of the Institutional partners. Lastly, excellent courses will look to the future, both in terms of having plans for the continuity of skills and expertise and also to explore options for financial sustainability.

Component three covers the teaching and learning experience and is called **Quality of Teaching and Learning (QATL)**. The curriculum needs to be designed as a coherent set of modules, not just something that is extracted from a range of existing course offerings. The Course objectives and the expected outcomes both need to be articulated, and the way in which the course is meeting them also needs to be monitored. The ways in which student work is assessed needs to be at least coherent (it should be clear to students how work is assessed at each partner site) and ideally consistent (student work should be assessed to the same criteria at all partner sites). The Course should be subjected to independent and external review so that the advice from high-reputation international academics can provide pointers to the future Course development. The multi-cultural nature of the student community can be acknowledged by developing a clear set of Course rules and ethical expectations (both socially and academically). Students from such diverse backgrounds can also benefit through the provision of opportunities to extend and enrich their learning skills.

The final component is what makes Erasmus Mundus such a powerful international academic brand and this is called **Joined-up Practice and Integration (JUPI)**. The extent to which the partners and Institutions work together, coherently, will be a strong determination of the extent to which the Erasmus Mundus Course is working to meet the Bologna objectives. The selection of students needs the full involvement of all partners. Communication between partners, students, and the Institutions is best achieved through a robust information (for example to store and share student information) and communication (to provide a single point for communication) system. The partners need to accept that the division of labour is both equitable and that it will meet the demands of the curriculum being delivered to the students. Students across the Course should be given opportunities to provide feedback on the Course and to give advice on how the Course can further improve. Lastly, the Course Management processes should show efficiency and integration of practice, rather than just being an amalgam of different practices and procedures across partner sites.

1.4 Visualising and Representing the Components

The four components of excellence were represented in two outputs. First, courses can carry out a self-assessment of excellence using an online tool. Second, the examples of good practice from the six courses are provided in a written Handbook. Both outputs are available on a Web site, where the written Handbook of Excellence, along with the online Self-Assessment Tool (www.emqa.eu) provides a mechanism to explore, individually or collaboratively, where excellence is being demonstrated in an Erasmus Mundus Course, or whether a planned course is covering all of the key aspects of excellence.

The online tool does this by inviting responses a set of structured questions derived from 18 detailed visits to partners at six existing Courses. While they are not intended to be a complete and comprehensive set, they should allow courses to explore where improvement could be prioritised. There also is the facility for both staff and students to assess a course, using a subset of questions that are directed to the student experience. The Handbook material can be used alongside the self-assessment tool, and provides a structured checklist of actions for consideration, and provides examples of good practice from existing courses.

1.5 Conclusions

Erasmus Mundus has clearly established itself as a quality academic brand which attracts both high quality academics and students. In our first report to the Steering Group we gave our initial reflections after the first set of visits, expressing our positive feedback on the quality of the people involved in the courses. In our second report we were able to structure the material into a coherent set of explanatory components, and to start organising it into a handbook that provides guidance to courses.

After the completion of the visits, and the analysis of the large body of information gathered from the course teams, the students, and our visit reports, we have presented the self-assessment tool along with the Handbook. Reflecting on the material and the visits we can make some general concluding observations.

The first general observation we gained during the 18 visits is that there are committed and high quality academic teams who are developing their own sophisticated academic offering which is attracting very high quality students from Third Countries. There is acceptance by the academics that the students add value to the partner institutions themselves, for example by internationalising the university, or by expanding the research capacity of academic departments when Master students progress to doctoral research. There is acceptance by the students that they must confront challenges with energy and intelligence, such as the process of cultural transformation from home to the EU and from culture to culture within the EU. Students want the work to be challenging, because they want opportunities to learn, chances to test themselves, and a pathway to learning and personal enrichment.

The second general observation is that the best courses focus on a process of continuous improvement through a partnership between the staff and the students. Students frequently noted that they felt as if they are treated as equals, and that their views matter. Indeed, this is to be expected given the incoming qualifications and experience of many of the students. However, it also reflects a sensitivity of the course teams to the fact that the reputation of their course is being communicated around the world by their students.

Students use all the latest communication tools, and therefore are an important marketing partner. There is no better marketing partner than someone who has been involved in the improvement of an already high quality product. The recruitment of high quality students was not achieved through passive advertising of the courses and just receiving applications, and successful courses build a supportive and informative infrastructure around the application and recruitment process.

The third general observation is that Erasmus Mundus course teams not only build innovative academic programmes that can work across the European academic space, but also build support facilities around the course so that logistical challenges with the student mobility are overcome. In that context the relationship with students is established at the point when they apply to the course, and the relationship continues long after graduation as students become ambassadors for Erasmus Mundus around the world. The course teams are marketing their product to very discriminating customers who are being tempted by other course offerings from North American or Asia-Pacific universities. The students who come to Erasmus Mundus are

convinced that Europe was indeed attractive on its own terms and that the course offerings of Erasmus Mundus had characteristics and qualities that are not being provided elsewhere. .

The fourth general observation is that a successful course has both excellent people and excellent procedures. We could take a counterfactual approach at the end of this study and ask whether courses of the Erasmus Mundus type would have developed without the formal intervention of the European Commission. This question was asked indirectly to course teams in the context of discussions about coping with the administrative overheads that came with the funding for their course. There was a general acceptance that the administrative burden of such overheads, while some of them could be reduced, was more than worthwhile. The framework of Erasmus Mundus, for example the funding, and the formal processes of achieving academic coherence across European institutions, the global visibility provided by the European Commission¹, provides a strong and supportive framework to those who are constructing pan-European Master courses.

So, within the QUIL dimension we see the human elements that underpin courses – the quality of people within the partner institutions, and the quality of the institutional commitment to the courses. Constructing of an Erasmus Mundus course requires a complex mix of excellent academics, committed and supportive institutions, and outstanding students. In all of our visits we were met by students who were remarkably capable both academically and culturally. They came to Europe knowing that they would be challenged by different cultures and different learning environments. Time after time the students told us that that the diversity of experience they found in Europe prepared them well to be global academics and global citizens.

The academics we met were committed researchers and teachers – that was an overriding characteristic, and it is unlikely that a successful Erasmus Mundus course can be delivered by people who are just committed teachers. That imposes considerable demands on research-active academics, because it was clear from our visits that to apply for a course, and then to run the course, is a considerable administrative burden. Respondents noted that the administrative burden of Erasmus Mundus was about twice that of running a conventional Master course. However, this did not lead to an outpouring of frustration from the course teams, although they did note areas where administrative procedures could be improved.

However, there is a real concern of career progression for these highly research-active academics. They are people whose career progression is based primarily on research outputs, not teaching activities. The opportunity costs of carrying on supporting the development of Erasmus Mundus can therefore be finely balanced. This is an area where institutional commitment can be influential, particularly where there is recognition for being involved in courses such as Erasmus Mundus, and where the institution also recognised the added value that the course brings in the context of internationalisation strategy.

Being the innovative people they are, the course teams have often built a remarkably supportive administrative structure within the course, the most notable aspect of that being the deeply embedded roles of Programme Coordinator and administrators. For students the task of simply getting a visa to enter Europe demanded a level of commitment that, no doubt, dissuaded some

¹ For example, a Google search of “Erasmus Mundus” returns 580,000 ‘hits’, and the ability to use this phrase with a discipline, (e.g. “Erasmus Mundus” geography) rapidly returns a list of possible courses.

potential students at a very early stage. It is clear that inter-institutional mobility demands ingenuity and persistence both on behalf of course administrators and the students themselves.

Students frequently told us about the highly responsive and supportive people in the administrative teams. In the end one of the unique selling points of the best courses is the way in which students are supported as individuals – students told us a lot about the value of being part of a relatively small, intimate academic group where the teachers and students work together as equals. This helps them to excel academically, and an added-value outcome from that is evident in the students who accompanied us (nominated by the Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association² on the visits. They were erudite ambassadors for Erasmus Mundus, and they contributed significantly to our visits by leading the constructively critical meetings with students on the courses.

There is then the importance of leadership, which first and foremost is seen in most of the course through a nexus of senior academics who have provided the vision, the energy, and the team-building skills to help people work effectively across institutional boundaries. The best course teams function as a network of excellence, where they have prior experience of researching with each other, and where they have common membership of international research networks. From those observations it becomes clear that an Erasmus Mundus team cannot simply be created by a group of academics making initial contact and then applying to run a course.

We noted early on in this process that having talented teachers and course organisers, and first class students is, however, by no means enough of itself. Within the QATL (quality of teaching and learning) component there are the elements of an integrated service proposition for the students, and by allowing them to focus their energies on studying it helps them to excel as international students with a unique pan-European experience.

Within the FLAF dimension the overall picture that emerges is the importance of supporting students effectively during a challenging period of mobility to, and within, Europe. It is not enough to take a view that a particular course is attractive to students, and from the many discussions with students it became very clear that they were experiencing considerable challenges even getting to Europe (obtaining visas, securing accommodation etc.), living within the local communities (registering with services, language skills etc.), moving between partner institutions (travel logistics, securing accommodation etc.), and obtaining effective access to student services (accommodation support, financial advice and support, and cultural support) and general academic facilities (libraries, IT services, etc.).

While it may be easy to respond that most of these challenges are experienced by any student undergoing mobility, the particular characteristics of Erasmus Mundus means that the students experience the challenges more intensely. Erasmus Mundus Master courses require students first to move to Europe, then to study on intense academic programmes, and to move between partner institutions during that programme. Excellent courses therefore construct support mechanisms for students that allow the students to focus their energies on study, rather than on the general logistical challenges.

² <http://www.em-a.eu/>

The one component of excellence where there was more variability of practice was the quality of teaching and learning (QLTI). While this component is at the centre of the actual academic experience it is the most challenging for the course teams, because many of the activities are ones where the course teams have little power to change things quickly. These include the procedures within institutions by which courses are proposed, accepted and validated. It includes the formal procedures for the assessment of student work, and the ways in which examinations are set and marked. It includes the ways in which course modules are 'weighted' in conformance with the principles of ECTS.

Such activities are often embedded in departmental, faculty and institutional teaching and learning procedures, and the decision-making timelines can be lengthy. Even the formal signing of a consortium agreement can take months or years, as the agreement is checked and ratified at all the relevant levels of the institutions, and then there is the additional checking and ratification process between the institutional senior staff. Consequently, many courses will respect these formal procedures, but also will find innovative solutions to make sure that things 'work from the outset'. This flexibility to 'make things happen' is the characteristic of a strong consortium.

And again, a consortium can be flexible only if there is a strong trust-based working relationship between all the partners. Excellent course teams have built effective communication systems, often using secure Intranets. However, that process supports both routine communication and the efficient transfer of information around the consortium. What this does not create is the sense of 'working together' and trust. Those characteristics are generated only when a consortium meets regularly, is mobile around the partner sites (individual staff mobility for example) and researches together as well as teaching together. Furthermore, the course teams will have a clear sense of what needs to happen to ensure continuity of course offerings if there are sudden staff changes in one part of the consortium.

As we reviewed and processed the material gathered we focused in particular on the single characteristic, the JUPI component, which discriminates Erasmus Mundus from other European Master courses. This was what we termed 'jointness', which is the extent to which all the components of a course are joined up into a seamless, integrated course. In such a course the students would have a single point of contact for all matters ranging from accommodation at partner sites, visa advice, pre-emptive language training (so that they are prepared at least for conversational competences as they arrive in a new country), course materials (course descriptors, reading lists etc.) all provided in a single consistent style across all partner institutions, the course modules offered consistently and coherently (requiring planning of staff availability on a consortium-wide basis), and examination and assessment methods applied consistently at all partner sites.

This is, of course, the goal of Erasmus Mundus, but with the first set of courses there was acknowledgement that to design and deliver a fully integrated course from the outset was a huge challenge, and like the Bologna process, the Erasmus Mundus Master course has been a journey towards coherence and excellence.

The teachers/organisers had to create courses across international and institutional boundaries in a way that had to give objective sense and practical, workable coherence. They had to cope with and navigate their way through their own institutions' course approval processes for a

Master course that took in third country students. They had to bring on board the different norms and procedures of the other partners in the consortium. They had to engineer compromises in marking systems, course and assignment weightings and the grading and overall assessment process leading to the final degree award. While doing this they had to do the teaching, assess the work and look after the students wider needs in an unfamiliar environment

Therefore these early courses have been pioneers, and the ways in which they have constructed coherence and excellence should now not just help other existing course to improve, but importantly to provide the next generation of Erasmus Mundus courses with the means of accelerating the production of a quality product for the students. In that context the Handbook and the online 'tool' are themselves dynamic products that can be continually developed, and can become part of the Erasmus Mundus journey towards excellence.