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HOW TO SET UP A ROBUST PARTNERSHIP?

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0/ Introduction

What does robust mean?

Having health and vigor; having active strength of body or mind; not showing weakness or uncertainty; being active, dynamic, energetic, fit, flourishing, lively, prospering, strong, tough, vital.

Not the opposite: being bad, diseased, ill, fragile, lazy, powerless, unfit, unhealthy, weak.

Definition of a Joint Master degree: list of characteristics

According to the 'definitions' a Joint Master Degree Programme is expected to have set up an academic curriculum, that:

- is jointly designed;
- is fully integrated;
- has common implementation procedures: joint student application, selection, admission and examination rules;
- has shared internal Quality Assurance mechanisms;
- awards a joint or multiple diploma's;

It will be very demanding, to set up such a programme and even more to have a robust partnership running, for years...

1/ What should be the basis of a Joint Programme Consortium?

- Start with partners you know well, focus on the topic and the relevance for the society, including the labour market, invite other partners to complement what you are able to offer but what is still missing. It is about the choice of the partners and the relevant topic. It is about trust.
- The perfect number of partners does not exist. Each partner needs to have a real task. If the number of partners is too low, then you might have a risk (see under 4 below), but if the number is too high, then some partners might not have a full task, moreover integration and harmonization of all partners takes more time. So, if the EC requires a minimum of 3 partners in a Consortium, it seems the best to start with / to have 4 or 5 partners.

2/ What would be the next step to construct the programme?

- Start writing on the detailed curriculum, to decide whether it is a 60, 90 or 120 ECTS programme and to find out the best study / mobility path.
- Select the best teaching and administrative staff members you need to have.
- Decide on the minimum number of students (needed to start with) and on the maximum number of students (not without limits of course); accept that the number of students might be quite disappointing in the early years.
- For instance, as experience shows, for a master programme of high quality and excellent students from an educational perspective the maximum number in class is 35, but this might depend on the specific discipline and might even be lower.

- Of course, by having parallel classes at the same time (by another track at one of the partners) you will be able to increase the maximum total number of students in the programme, which most likely will be good from a sustainability point of view.
- Start arranging the accreditation / recognition of the degree(s) to be awarded, by all partners; if possible start with a joint degree, if not then start with a multiple degree.
- Contact potential students, starting at all partner universities; ask under which requirements / conditions they would be interested to take part in such a programme.
- For all partner universities: contact the local potential employers, what knowledge / skills do these employers expect from your alumni? What should be in the curriculum according to them; would they be interested in a kind of cooperation with your Consortium?

3/ What will make the programme run smoothly, without an internal fight among the partners?

- Document all the steps taken and decisions made from the start onwards: in a Consortium Agreement, in regulations on examinations, in financial regulations about the share of the money (both income and costs), in making sure that all partners are really involved in the programme (both in tasks, activities and in decisions and therefore in responsibilities as well).
- Arrange regular evaluations, among all partners and among students and 'Associated Partners' / potential employers as well.

4/ What is the best way to make sure the programme is sustainable?

- Make sure that you are not dependent on the partners you have: if one or two partners step out, for whatever reason, make sure you are able to continue, by preference by admitting some other partners being on the 'reserve list' as an 'Associated Partner'.
- Make sure that you are not dependent on some active staff members, most of the time being 1 or 2 leading persons; what will happen if they leave that university, or become ill, or at the moment of retirement? Make sure you have successors as well, ideally recruited from the joint programme's alumni itself, but that will take some years ...
- Make sure that there is a commitment within your own university, including the level of the rector, including a financial commitment especially for the start and the first years of the programme.
- Same as under 3: evaluations needed.