2025 European Quality Assurance Forum

**QA in times of crises – Ensuring stability,
autonomy and international cooperation in higher education**

**Hosted by Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary
12-14 November 2025**

Author(s)

Name: Timothée Toury

Position: Secretary General

Organisation: European University of Technology

Country: European Union (located in France)

Short bio: Timothée Toury is Secretary General and founding architect of the European University of Technology Alliance (EUt+).
An Associate Professor at Université de technologie de Troyes (Fr), he is a graduate of Ecole normale supérieure de Paris-Saclay and Paris.
He has authored over 45 peer-reviewed publications, patents, and book chapters, mainly in physics and nanotechnologies, and has led six European research and innovation projects.
He is a member of the board of the French quality assurance agency in engineering (CTI). He currently serves — or has served — on numerous executive boards and councils across higher-education institutions and acts as an expert advisor to international bodies on university governance and pedagogical reform.

Name: Rafael Toledo-Moreo

Position: Deputy Secretary General

Organisation: European University of Technology

Country: European Union (located in Spain)

Short bio: Rafael Toledo-Moreo is Deputy Secretary General of the EuropeanUniversity of Technology (EUt+) Alliance and the architect of its reporting system, Standards and Guidelines for Harmonization, and other executive processes. Rafael is an Associate Professor at the Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena (UPCT), Spain, where he has also served as Vice-Rector for Internationalization and European University and as Coordinator for Innovation. With a background in Space Engineering, he was responsible for the electronic control unit of the infrared instrument onboard the Euclid telescope, a cosmological mission of the European Space Agency.

Name: Karine Lan Hing Ting

Position: Academic Policy Officer

Organisation: European University of Technology

Country: European Union (located in France)

Short bio: Karine Lan Hing Ting is a sociologist and Academic Policy Officer within the European University of Technology Alliance Secretariat General. She plays a key role in the alliance's institutional transformation, bringing expertise in Living Labs, participatory design, and international collaboration. At the University of Technology of Troyes, she led action-research projects focused on human-centred

innovation in health, disability inclusion, education, and student integration. Her interdisciplinary work promotes socially responsible innovation and quality development in higher education.

Through her applied and reflexive approach, she contributes to shaping the future European University, linking quality assurance with inclusive, international, and collaborative transformation processes.

Paper

Title: Beyond Compatibility: Quality Assurance for Fostering Convergence in European Universities Alliances

Abstract

European University Alliances are poised to play a key role in shaping the future of European higher education, even as the concept of a "European University" continues to evolve. As a working hypothesis, we propose that such alliances differ from simple universities networks in that they are structured around a common engagement in quality assurance on their explicit objective of integrating and transforming their academic missions. This is particularly relevant for EUt+, whose rectors have formally endorsed the goal of an eventual merger. This contribution reflects on the meaning and implementation of QA at the alliance level, drawing on insights from previous projects (including EUniQ) and initial internal experimentation within EUt+. First, we propose a methodological framework that recognizes the experimental and diverse nature of alliances, distinguishing two key QA dimensions, independently addressed: (1) The strategic relevance of the alliance's plan and its implementation plan assessed in relation to members' strengths and environments; (2) The effectiveness of its implementation plan execution, evaluated through tangible outcomes, institutional uptake, and progress on the implementation plan. Conflating these dimensions risks undermining bold strategies, misaligning KPIs, and distorting resource allocation. Then, as an application case study, the paper presents the EUt+ Standards and Guidelines for Harmonization (SGH), a methodology for guiding and monitoring the implementation of the Alliance's Mission Statement and strategic goals across member universities. Inspired by the EHEA ESG, the ten SGH reflect EUt+'s ambition to become an integrated international super-campus while respecting institutional diversity. Though not exhaustive or fully independent, the standards address core missions and systemic transformation. Self-assessment reports reveal varying levels of adoption but strong overall commitment. Members welcomed the approach and recognized the need for a strategic alignment. Interviews and focus groups with representatives from other alliances confirmed the framework's relevance and potential for adaptation to diverse alliance contexts.

1. Working assumption and research question: European University Alliances as university networks that submit their mission and delivery to quality assurance

Since 2019, European Commission calls have created 65 "European Universities". These alliances pursue varied aims and follow different trajectories; they operate as laboratories for alternative visions of European higher education. Because the concept itself is still evolving, pragmatic working definitions are needed to distinguish alliances from other inter-university networks.

In order to clarify the nature of these new systems, and beyond their necessary diversity, fruitful and pragmatic working definitions are needed. Success in a European Commission call does not by itself answer the question: *what makes an alliance an alliance?*

Because alliances are made up of universities—indeed, they are built *upon* them—we approach the problem as follows: what qualitatively distinguishes a European University Alliance from a usual network of universities?

http://bit.ly/EQAFLinkedin

The political expectations and declared objectives of alliances show a constant across the various types. It reveals an essential difference between a **common interest** and a **joint objective**:

A *network* is a cooperative space that helps each member pursue some of its own objectives more effectively. Members pool costs, exchange practices, and undertake common actions—comparative studies, advocacy, or shared pedagogical best practices—because everyone benefits. The network's value is reflected in what members subsequently do; the network is not itself an academic object designed to be evaluated.

An *alliance*, by contrast, is a group of universities that decide to share part of their future. Members pool a portion of their constitutive structures and *raison d'être* to build a *joint good* borne by several institutions—an academic object whose value depends on a single, indivisible, collective foundation (e.g. a joint degree, a common research institute, or an integrated information system). The alliance creates something irreducible to the sum of individual gains and, although mainly project-funded, aims to develop on a permanent basis.

This distinction has direct consequences for quality assurance (QA). A network seeks to improve the quality of each member's activities and should be assessed through those individual benefits. An alliance builds a joint academic object with its own aims, resources, and results, not reducible to the sum of the benefits. It, therefore, calls for a dedicated QA approach because

- it is an academic object (in education, research, or service) whose quality must be assured;
- resources are limited and must be used efficiently and consistently with the stated ambition;
- neither objectives nor functioning can be appraised by separately considering the inputs and benefits of each member.

More generally, when constructing a joint object, activities must be distinguished from achievements. Did collective action reach the intended objective? Was the impact commensurate with the effort? How does the joint object contribute to the wider academic system? Could alternative designs deliver more? These questions make sense at alliance level; in a network they are meaningful only at the level of each member.

From these observations, we propose a working definition: **an alliance is a network of universities that submits its joint objective, activities, and outcomes to a quality-assurance process**. Alliances so defined differ from university networks by their commitment to QA applied to an explicit objective of integration and transformation of some of their academic missions. The scope of that objective may vary—from a limited set of joint programmes to the horizon of a merger.

This leads to a research question: **what QA framework is relevant and workable, given the diversity of alliance mission statements?** The answer will indicate whether our proposed definition is robust and fruitful. The question is especially salient for the European University of Technology (EUt+) Alliance, whose members have endorsed an eventual merger as a strategic horizon. Building on prior initiatives (including EUniQ[1]) and initial internal experimentation, we explore how quality assurance can go well beyond mere adherence to standards—and thus minimal compatibility—and becomes an instrument for steering institutional convergence.

2. A methodological framework: distinguishing the objective and its implementation as two dimensions to be assessed independently

---

[1] https://www.nvao.net/en/euniq

EQAF
European Quality Assurance Forum

http://bit.ly/EQAFLinkedin

We propose a framework[2] that embraces the experimental and heterogeneous nature of alliances. No single template should be imposed; as all academic configurations—existing or novel—are *a priori* possible within various environments. Widely accepted frameworks (e.g. ESG) should apply when relevant to the object being built, but alliances often go beyond simple aggregation or ad hoc adjustments to existing practices and regulations[3].

Any alliance objective must rest on a strategy of its own. Because alliances explore new configurations, their strategy requires explicit evaluation in its own right—drawing on, but not limited to, existing reference frameworks. Implementation and results must then be assessed as a distinct endeavour. Accordingly, two QA dimensions should be appraised separately: **(1)** the *strategic relevance* of the alliance's plan and of its implementation plan, assessed in relation to members' strengths and external environments; and **(2)** the *effectiveness of execution* of that implementation plan, evidenced by tangible outputs, institutional uptake, and progress measured toward the defined strategic objectives.

Distinguishing the plan from its situated implementation is essential. Blurring strategy and execution risks weakening bold designs, skewing indicators, and misallocating resources:

- Strategic documents are often adjusted during implementation when initial, validated ambitions prove unrealistic or inconsistent. If such corrections happen implicitly at the implementation stage, the process becomes opaque, foundational documents lose legitimacy, and institutional positioning blurs. Strategy should therefore result from an organised, transparent dialogue with identified stakeholders within the legal and regulatory framework, and any subsequent revisions must remain explicit and coherent.
- Reopening strategy piecemeal during implementation erodes overall coherence and weakens strategy's integrative function, with organisational and managerial consequences. Evaluating concrete results while simultaneously questioning strategic orientations fosters this gradual unravelling.
- Implementation should be evaluated against its own stated objectives, not against other (external) benchmarks that are outside the strategy (e.g., national averages, historical performance, or "standard" practices elsewhere). Doing otherwise amounts to revisiting the strategy—an exercise that belongs to the alliance (possibly on recommendation from external QA). If the strategy is inapplicable or incoherent, this should be identified during the strategic evaluation; in which case, proceeding to the second dimension no longer makes sense.

For internal QA, the two dimensions should be clearly delineated. Where external QA is envisaged, distinct agencies could in theory undertake each dimension; in practice this is rarely optimal, as a holistic understanding informs both. A single evaluation can preserve separation by allocating responsibilities within the auditing team.

2.1. First dimension: assessing the strategic relevance of the alliance's plan and its implementation plan in line with members' strengths and institutional context

---

[2] https://www.univ-tech.eu/quality-assurance-for-the-alliance

[3] Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2019, European Universities, p. 130 "the alliance will strengthen and expand cooperation through innovative and new structural models"

EQAF
European Quality Assurance Forum

http://bit.ly/EQAFLinkedin

The first step is to examine the strategy adopted for the alliance's shared object. Strategy denotes a sustainable, long-term positioning aligned with member universities' environments and resources, and consistent with the alliance's values and mission. Key questions include:

- Are the environment, capacities, and resources appropriately analysed, with credible assumptions?
- Do mission and values drive the strategy?
- Is the plan coherent and viable as a whole?
- Is the shared objective genuinely transformative, and reasonably balanced across members?
- Are implications understood by internal and external stakeholders at each critical levels?

The strategy must be translated into an implementation and progress-measurement plan. Supporting questions include:

- Is there a structured, realistic trajectory calibrated to the alliance's maturity?
- Is the plan cascaded into members' strategic plans?
- Are indicators defined to measure progress?
- Is ownership and buy-in monitored at all levels?

These questions derive from our definition of an alliance. They do not apply to a network, which may set admission criteria that guarantee mutual interest but does not prescribe or reshape members' strategies.

2.2. Second dimension: The effectiveness in deploying the mission statement, institutional uptake, and progress in the implementation plan.

Currently, the assessment of alliances' models for strategic leadership, governance, internal quality, cooperation mechanisms, and joint educational offerings stays mainly embedded in the first dimension. Approaches such as the EUA Institutional Evaluation Program for Alliances[4] (launched in May 2025) may complement or replace these assessments for long-term initiatives beyond project and grant durations.

To generate impact within the European Higher Education Area and society, however, we must observe, assess, and leverage systemic transformations at member level.

In EUt+, whose ambitions include normalised student mobility, European Research Institutes (common laboratories), and similar initiatives, transformation of member universities is the main driver of progress. QA at alliance activities level alone cannot ensure inclusive transformation; building a truly European university for all starts with, and rests on, deep changes within members.

Beyond members' direct contributions to Alliance objective - currently monitored through indicators derived from the Alliance level - or to tasks, joint bodies, and offices, another measure of participation and change emerges as central: the Standards and Guidelines for Harmonisation (SGH). The SGH both supports and is a way to analyse internal adoption processes that, while not always visible at the Alliance level, are fundamental for achieving lasting impact. They allow relevant consideration of both the pathway to impact (*process*) and the impact itself (*effects*).

---

[4] https://www.eua.eu/news/eua-news/eua-iep-launches-evaluations-of-european-universities-alliances.html?utm_source=bluesky&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=social-bluesky-06-05-2025

3. EUt+ concrete example: standards and guidelines for harmonisation in EUt+

3.1. The SGH objectives

The EUt+ Standards and Guidelines for Harmonisation[5] were developed to guide and monitor implementation of the Alliance's Mission Statement and strategic goals across member universities. Self-assessment reports show differing levels of adoption but strong overall commitment. Members welcomed the approach and recognised the need for strategic alignment. The SGH reflect EUt+'s ambition to become an integrated European super-campus while respecting members' diversity. Though not exhaustive or fully independent, the standards address core missions and systemic transformation:

- **Standards:** what it means to be an EUt+ campus.
- **Guidelines:** how to implement those standards.
- **Harmonisation:** where we want to go together in line with European levels.

The SGH pursue the following objectives:

1. Provide a common framework to support campus transformation, foster institutional integration within EUt+, and promote reflection on internal processes.
2. Create a shared space for dialogue that builds mutual trust, transparency, and awareness of the EUt+ Mission within and across member institutions.
3. Encourage the exchange of good practices and lessons learned related to implementing the Mission Statement.
4. Promote recognition of other members' provisions and progress toward joint Quality Assurance validation at the EUt+ level.
5. Clarify the implications of adopting the EUt+ Standards to facilitate cooperation with external partners and potential future members.

3.2. Background and methodology

The SGH originated in the STYX project[6], which explored the value of a legal entity and complementary mechanisms for integration. Over one year, the SGH concept was proposed; drafting and revision teams were established; a first version and self-evaluation reports (SERs) were produced; focus groups were held; and the final report was endorsed by the EUt+ Rectors' Board in April 2024. Following the EUt+ Accelerate first annual review (October 2024), the SGH were formally adopted in January 2025 and inserted into the EUt+ Consortium Agreement as the official tool for monitoring harmonisation among members.

The SGH are developed through a collaborative, consensus-based process coordinated by the Secretariat General and the Steering Group (one representative per member). The main steps are:

- Drafting: The Drafting Team reviews the Mission Statement, EU context, and member and student feedback to update the SGH.
- Consultation: The updated version is shared with the Steering Group for comments and presented in online sessions.
- Publication: After final editing, the new release is shared via the internal platform and presented to relevant bodies.

---

[5] https://www.univ-tech.eu/standards-guidelines-for-harmonisation

[6] https://www.univ-tech.eu/the-styx-project-towards-a-status-1

- Self-evaluation: Each member forms a Revision Team (including staff and students) to complete SERs following a common calendar.
- Review and analysis: SERs are analysed both internally and by an external panel, using quantitative and qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups).
- Reporting: A map of SGH adoption and a report with adoption levels, barriers, good practices, and recommendations are produced and shared.
- Feedback and improvement: Results inform continuous refinement.

3.3. Description of the EUt+ SGH

The latest version of the EUt+ SGH includes ten standards organized as follows:

1. Resources and Participation in EUt+
2. European Values in EUt+
3. Student Access to EUt+ Information and Opportunities
4. EUt+ Embedded in the Study Offer
5. EUt+ in Research, Development, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship
6. Digital Transition and Common Services
7. EUt+ Brand and Outreach
8. EUt+ as Long-Term Strategy
9. Internal Reviews and Standards Self-evaluations
10. External Reviews

To illustrate their design, two representative examples, Standards 4 and 8, are presented below, together with the guidelines for Standard 8.

Standard 4 EUt+ Embedded in the Study Offer

An EUt+ member university embeds the EUt+ dimension in the process of creating, maintaining, and renewing its academic offer, applying methodologies for its design, approval, implementation, control, and review that follow the relevant EUt+ frameworks. It allows its students to obtain the EUt+ European certificate/label and prepares its programs for European Degrees.

Standard 8 EUt+ as Long-Term Strategy

EUt+ is an integral part of the strategy of an EUt+ member university. This is formalized in the university's strategic plan (approved by the competent governing body) and reflected in its policies. This strategy responds to global societal challenges.

Guidelines

1) *Commit to advancing the process of harmonization with other EUt+ partners in pursuit of the Alliance's shared goals.*
2) *The objectives of the university strategy must be aligned with the EUt+ objectives, and the university vision must be aligned with the EUt+ principles and mottos. University objectives that are not aligned with EUt+ shall not present a conflict.*
3) *Define and monitor strategic plan KPIs including the EUt+ dimension and provide access to their status and progress for all relevant actors.*
4) *Regular evaluations of the KPI results are done, including quantitative and qualitative information to get a comprehensive understanding of the progress.*

5) *Strategic institutional analysis and marketing assessments include the EUt+ dimension. When relevant, they are complemented by benchmarking and consultation activities involving EUt+ members, such as desk research, interviews, or focus groups.*

6) *Internal and external stakeholders participate actively in the development and evaluation of the university strategy and policies.*

7) *Facilitate the participation of EUt+ member universities in panels for strategic revisions and updates.*

8) *Implement mechanisms to monitor performance indicators relevant to this standard as defined at EUt+ level, complementing them where appropriate with member-specific indicators. Report results, based on quantitative and qualitative evidence, to the relevant EUt+ and institutional bodies and stakeholders, and apply the PDCA cycle to foster continuous improvement.*

Standard 4 is a main pillar of EUt+: the Alliance's study offer is developed by embedding EUt+ within strategic processes for designing, maintaining, and renewing curricula. The standard derives from the Mission Statement and Vision: only by integrating the Alliance paradigm into programme design and delivery can a holistic Europeanisation of higher education be achieved. It does not prescribe a single transformation strategy; rather, it emphasises that transformation should be treated as a regular part of institutional processes and decision-making, with explicit objectives such as preparedness for European Degrees and enabling the EUt+ Label Certificate (mobility and multilingualism for all students).

Standard 8 addresses strategic alignment: a EUt+ member university advances systematically toward long-term ambitions when its strategic plan and related policies align with Alliance objectives while reflecting global societal challenges. The guidelines interpret the standard, prompt reflection, and support self-evaluation and harmonisation without prescribing specific actions. They encompass processes, principles, participation, monitoring, evaluation, and review.

3.4. Insights from the first pilot

Overall, the revision teams evaluated the methodology, standards, and guidelines positively, considering them effective tools to advance EUt+ goals. Self-evaluation reports helped assess each member's situation, identify adopted and pending standards, and map strengths and weaknesses to integrate the ten standards into institutional procedures. The guidelines supported deeper understanding and fostered a culture of quality. Participants observed that while the standards are well described, interpretation can vary across institutions; diverse review teams add value by contextualising evidence.

Focus groups confirmed that the SGH are broadly relevant beyond EUt+, offering a systematic and pragmatic approach that can support the integration of new members. Participants praised the visual representation of adoption levels and alignment with established QA practices. Some cautioned that harmonisation suits EUt+'s level of integration but may not suit all alliances, given different mission statements.

Internal and external stakeholders regard the SGH as effective instruments for understanding and supporting the penetration of the Alliance's activities, vision, and mission within member universities.

EUt+ members demonstrated a clear commitment to harmonisation and a positive disposition toward adopting common standards that embody the Alliance's values and principles. Throughout the pilot, all institutions contributed substantively by submitting reports, engaging in collective discussions, and

assessing EUt+ integration within their own contexts. The formal adoption of the SGH by the Rectors as a monitoring instrument beyond project cycles marks a notable milestone in consolidating the Alliance.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates practical methods for implementing transformation within EUt+. More broadly, it advances two claims. First, alliances differ from networks because they construct joint academic objects and submit them to QA. Second, a workable QA framework for alliances distinguishes two dimensions—strategic relevance and effectiveness of execution—while tracking institutional uptake through harmonisation standards. Together, these pillars offer a pragmatic route "beyond compatibility" toward measurable convergence in European higher education.

While at an early stage that calls for deepening and systematic benchmarking against equivalent experiments, it has already delivered documented, transferable formal documents for extended testing and progressive improvement.