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Timothée Toury is the Secretary General of the European University of Technology Alliance (EUt+) where he initiated the original idea and vision. He has been Associate Professor (physics) at Université de technologie de Troyes where he has been Director of Academic Affairs and led 6 European projects. He is a member of the board of the "Commission des titres d'ingénieurs". He is or has been and expert for the World Bank and French development agency (AFD) in university governance and higher education and pedagogy reform, and a member of numerous executive boards, academic council or steering committees of HEI.

Paper

Beyond Compatibility, Revisited: Quality Assurance to Foster Europeanisation. Evidence from the First Full Implementation Cycle of the Standards and Guidelines for Harmonisation in EUt+

Abstract

In an era of rapid technological change, evolving labour markets and growing geopolitical pressures, Europe's capacity for innovation and competitiveness depends on higher education institutions that think and act as genuinely European actors, responsive to continental needs while remaining grounded in regional and national contexts. This requires universities to transform not only their programmes but their processes, governance structures and institutional culture, so that quality, relevance and employability are pursued at a European scale.

European Universities Alliances are a key vehicle for this transformation. Yet quality assurance approaches have not kept pace, remaining largely rooted in national and institutional frameworks or focused on isolated joint activities, often limited to full-fledged study programmes. This creates a challenge for alliances seeking to monitor, support and evaluate deep institutional transformation across partner universities in all their mission areas.

Building on a framework previously presented at EQAF 2025, which proposed a quality assurance framework for fostering convergence in European Universities alliances and introduced the Standards and Guidelines for Harmonisation (SGH) developed within the European University of Technology (EUt+), this paper presents the framework's further developments and the results of its first full implementation cycle. EUt+, whose ambitions include European Degrees in Engineering, European Research Institutes and the full Europeanisation of its members, provides the empirical context. The SGH address ten standards spanning universities' full range of academic and institutional missions, from student access and European values to research, digital transition and external quality review, enabling institutions to assess how far they think and act as European universities. The complete cycle

encompasses member Self-Assessment Reports (SERs), an External Evaluation Panel process, and External Evaluation Reports (EERs).

The paper presents findings on strengths, recurring challenges and lessons learned, offering insights for alliances, QA agencies and policymakers navigating the path toward deeply integrated transnational higher education.

1. Introduction

In an era of rapid technological change, evolving labour markets, and growing geopolitical pressures, Europe's capacity for innovation and competitiveness depends on higher education institutions that think and act as genuinely European actors - responsive to continental needs while remaining grounded in regional and national contexts. This requires universities to transform not only their programmes but their processes, governance structures, and institutional culture, so that quality, relevance, and the capacity to contribute to innovation and employability are pursued at a European scale.

European University Alliances are a key vehicle for this transformation. Since 2019, seventy-three such alliances have been created under the European Universities Initiative, operating as laboratories for new forms of integration across education, research, innovation, and governance. Yet quality assurance approaches have not kept pace with this evolution. They remain largely rooted in national and institutional frameworks or focused on isolated joint activities - often limited to full-fledged study programmes. This creates a significant challenge for alliances seeking to monitor, support, and evaluate deep institutional transformation across partner universities in all their mission areas.

This paper addresses that challenge by presenting the results of the first full implementation cycle of the EUt+ Standards and Guidelines for Harmonisation (SGH), an instrument developed by the European University of Technology Alliance (EUt+) to guide and assess the progressive embedding of the Alliance's mission and objectives across its nine member universities. Building on a QA framework for fostering convergence first presented at EQAF 2025, this paper documents how that framework has been operationalised, what it has produced, and what can be learned from it - for alliances, for quality assurance agencies, and for policymakers navigating the path toward deeply integrated transnational higher education.

2. The SGH framework

A foundational distinction underlies the SGH: the difference between a university network and a European University Alliance. A network is a cooperative space in which members pursue their own objectives more effectively through shared practices and joint initiatives. An alliance, by contrast, is a group of universities that decide to share part of their future - building joint academic objects, common structures, and coordinated strategies whose value cannot be assessed by examining individual institutional gains alone. This distinction has direct consequences for quality assurance. Alliance-level QA must address objects and processes that are irreducible to the sum of their institutional parts.

The EUt+ Standards and Guidelines for Harmonisation were developed to respond to this gap[1]. Inspired by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the SGH adapt established QA principles to the specific nature of an alliance. They are composed of three elements: Standards, which describe what it means to be an EUt+ campus; Guidelines, which provide practical orientations for implementation within diverse institutional contexts; and a Harmonisation process, understood as convergence that fosters mutual trust and transparency while respecting institutional diversity and autonomy.

The SGH address ten interrelated standards spanning the full range of universities' academic and institutional missions:

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

Together, these standards address the institutional transformation required to build a genuinely European university - from how students access Alliance opportunities and how curricula embed the European dimension, to how research strategies align with Alliance ambitions, how digital services support seamless cross-campus experience, and how institutions embed EUt+ within their long-term governance. The 2026 release of the SGH reflects an iterative update informed by implementation experience, confirming the instrument's nature as a living framework that evolves alongside the Alliance.

EUt+ provides the empirical context: an Alliance of nine technological universities whose ambitions include European Degrees in Engineering built from the transformation of national curricula, European Research Institutes as shared research structures, and the full Europeanisation of its member institutions - with rectors having formally endorsed an eventual merger as a long-term strategic horizon.

3. The first full implementation cycle

The first full SGH implementation cycle, presented in Figure 1, brought together three interdependent processes: member self-assessment, external evaluation, and structured feedback for continuous improvement.

Self-Assessment Reports (SERs). Each of the nine member institutions established a local Revision Team including academic staff, administrative staff, and students. Teams assessed the degree to which

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

each of the ten standards was adopted at their institution, using three levels - fully adopted, partially adopted, and not yet adopted - supported by documentary evidence and qualitative explanations. The process was supported by shared preparation materials, illustrative examples, and Q&A sessions coordinated by the Alliance Secretariat General. Teams submitted SERs following a common calendar, which were then reviewed internally and prepared for external evaluation.

External Evaluation Panel (EEP). The panel comprised four members: two external staff experts with EHEA experience, one student from the ESU QA pool, and one Alliance coordinator serving as panel coordinator whose main goal is ensuring process integrity. After reading the submitted SERs, for each member institution, the panel conducted three structured online interview sessions - with the SER preparation team, with institutional management, and with selected stakeholders including students, faculty representatives, and researchers - before drafting External Evaluation Reports (EERs).

External Evaluation Reports (EERs). Each EER follows a structured format covering each of the ten standards: a factual situation based on SER and evidence; an analysis of consistency between self-assessment and evidence; a planned trajectory assessment; a panel adoption level with rationale; and commendations and recommendations. Reports conclude with an overall assessment and a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats). At the time of this submission, not all nine interviews have been completed.

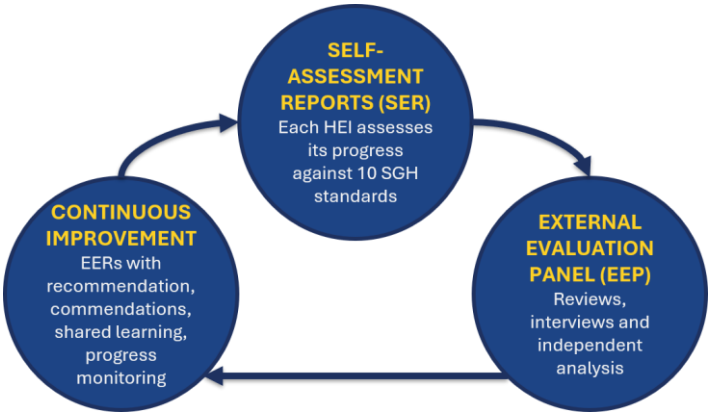


Fig. 1. The review cycle of the EUt+ Standards and Guidelines for Harmonisation.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, the full cycle - SERs, external panel interviews, and EERs - represents the first end-to-end operationalisation of alliance-level quality assurance applied to institutional transformation across an entire European University Alliance.

4. Findings from the self-assessment process

Structured feedback was gathered from the members' Head of Revision Teams through a live reflection session and written questionnaires, producing a rich evidence base across all nine members. Four themes emerge from this material.

Institutional commitment is strong, and the process has genuine developmental value. All nine member institutions participated substantively - submitting reports, engaging in collective discussions, and assessing EUt+ integration within their own contexts. Several institutions described the experience as inspiring, useful for internal priority-setting, or well supported by top management. The exercise was

broadly welcomed not as a compliance burden but as a genuine instrument for understanding where the Alliance stands within each campus. This level of engagement, in a first cycle, is a meaningful signal of the Alliance's quality culture.

The process is demanding, particularly in terms of timeline and evidence. The most widely reported challenge was logistical: locating, organising, and mapping existing evidence to the standards within a two-month preparation window. Evidence for genuine institutional activity was frequently dispersed across units, produced in national languages, or tied to individuals who had moved on. Several institutions noted that working in English added a distinct, non-trivial workload on top of the analytical effort. Most found the timeline workable but tight, particularly where meaningful internal consultation - with management, faculties, students, and support services - needed to extend beyond the EUt+ coordination unit. Extended advance notice and a staged preparation timeline are clear priorities for the next cycle.

The SER process surfaces where embedding is genuine and where it remains project-dependent. The most consistent and valuable finding from the self-assessment phase is not any single adoption level, but what the evidence-gathering process itself reveals: EUt+ is deeply embedded in institutional structures where it has been invested in over time, and more fragile where it depends on individual effort, project funding cycles, or specific staff whose departure can create institutional memory gaps. The SGH review cycle makes this distinction visible and discussable.

Calibration of adoption levels raises a structural question for future cycles. Several institutions independently described rating standards as "fully" or "partially" adopted in cases where the remaining gap was perceived as dependent on Alliance-level developments not yet completed - for example, Standards 9 and 10, which concern internal and external review processes that the Alliance itself is still building. This is a legitimate and honest calibration approach, but it requires shared guidance so that ratings are comparable across members and informative for the panel. Developing clearer guidance on how to distinguish institutional adoption from Alliance-level dependency will be a specific development priority going forward.

5. Findings from the external evaluation

The external panel's review of all nine member SERs, supported by structured interviews, reveals a set of cross-cutting patterns that hold across the Alliance - presented here without attribution to any specific institution.

Structural embedding is broadly achieved; operational embedding is the development frontier. The most consistent cross-cutting finding is the distinction between having EUt+ formally present in institutional structures - a coordination office in the organisational chart, EUt+ named in an approved strategic plan, a formal branding policy - and demonstrating that EUt+ objectives are operationally embedded in processes, decisions, and monitoring cycles. The former is largely in place across members; the latter is the main area for development. A functioning continuous improvement cycle specifically for EUt+ dimensions - with defined indicators, reported results, and documented improvement actions - is currently the exception rather than the rule.

Standards with the strongest adoption. Standards 1 (Resources and Participation) and 8 (Long-Term Strategy) show the most consistent institutional embedding: most members have EUt+ formally anchored in governance structures, dedicated coordination units, and approved strategic plans. Standard 7 (Brand and Outreach) also shows broad adoption of co-branding practices, with several institutions having issued formal institutional decisions on the use of the common EUt+ identity. Standard 2 (European Values) benefits from existing institutional frameworks on EDI, sustainability, and multilingualism, though the connection between these frameworks and the specific EUt+ dimension they are meant to serve is not always demonstrated.

Standards with the most significant development areas. Standards 9 (Internal Reviews) and 10 (External Reviews) present, by design, the least available evidence in a first cycle - since the SGH review process itself is what these standards describe. This is expected and will resolve progressively. Standards 5 (Research, Innovation, Entrepreneurship) and 6 (Digital Transition) reveal a more substantive pattern: active participation in Alliance-level research and digital structures is evidenced across members, but the embedding of the EUt+ dimension in institutional research strategies, digital governance procedures, and monitoring frameworks remains partial in most cases. Standard 4 (Study Offer) shows meaningful progress on mobility and recognition but significant variation in how deeply EUt+ frameworks have been integrated into regular curriculum design and renewal processes.

Self-assessment calibration reflects genuine effort and honest engagement. Across members, the panel found that concrete and well-documented institutional achievements coexist with declarative statements not yet tied to specific results, indicators, or decisions. Self-assessed levels of "fully adopted" at times reflect strong structural conditions and genuine institutional commitment rather than demonstrated guideline-by-guideline fulfilment. This is a first-cycle finding that points to the need for progressively more evidence-specific SER preparation guidance, and for clearer panel conventions on when structural presence is sufficient evidence of adoption and when operational demonstration is required.

The process generates quality dialogue. The review sessions were characterised by constructive and candid exchanges - institutions engaging openly with panel observations, acknowledging gaps honestly, and identifying improvement priorities. Several institutions used the interview itself as an opportunity for internal reflection across management, faculty, and student perspectives that had not previously been brought together around the EUt+ dimension. This is a qualitative outcome that adoption levels alone cannot capture, and one that a second cycle, building on the relationships and understanding established in this first one, should be able to deepen.

6. Lessons learned and implications

For alliances. The SGH experience points to three priorities for the next cycle. First, embed the SGH review into existing institutional QA cycles rather than treating it as a stand-alone exercise: institutions that had connected their SER preparation to their internal quality management systems found the process significantly less burdensome and the evidence more readily available. Second, develop shared calibration guidance that explicitly addresses the Alliance-level dependency question - giving institutions a clear way to distinguish their own institutional adoption from gaps that depend on Alliance-

wide progress not yet achieved. Third, consider developing an Alliance-level SER alongside institutional ones: three members independently proposed this, recognising that individual institutional SERs alone do not provide an aggregate view of where the Alliance stands as a whole. This convergent request is aligned with the EUt+ vision of what European Universities Alliances should become: a common vision supported by a genuinely multi-level QA instrument and accredited by EQAR-registered agencies.

For quality assurance agencies. Alliance-level QA requires evaluating transformation that is driven collectively but happens institutionally - a methodological space that existing national and institutional frameworks do not fully cover. External panels reviewing alliances need a specific competence profile combining higher education QA expertise with knowledge of transnational cooperation, European policy contexts, and the distinction between project-based and institutional embedding. The dual structure of self-assessment followed by external review, inspired by the ESG model, transfers well to the alliance context with appropriate adaptation - but the objects being evaluated (joint strategies, shared services, common research structures) require evaluators who understand what these look like from the inside. The SGH experience also suggests that the interview format - structured sessions with different stakeholder groups - is particularly well suited to surfacing the gap between structural presence and operational embedding that self-assessment alone cannot reliably detect.

For policymakers. A fully operational alliance-level QA cycle is feasible within the current European University Alliance framework and adds value that project-level monitoring cannot provide. It can identify where institutional transformation is genuinely embedded and where it remains project-dependent, name common structural barriers, and generate transferable methodological resources. Sustaining it beyond project funding cycles is essential: EUt+ has done this by embedding the SGH formally in its Alliance Quality Management Plan and Consortium Agreement, making it a governance instrument rather than a project deliverable. This step - from project tool to institutional mechanism - is what transforms a QA exercise into a convergence instrument. The SGH experience suggests that European higher education policy should actively support and recognise such mechanisms, alongside the project-level reporting obligations that currently dominate alliance governance.

7. Conclusion

The first full SGH implementation cycle demonstrates that alliance-level quality assurance is not only conceptually justified but practically operational. It can distinguish where institutional transformation is genuinely embedded from where it remains fragile, surface common barriers across diverse national and institutional contexts, generate constructive quality dialogue between institutions and external panels, and produce transferable methodological tools for other alliances.

The main findings produced by this first cycle include a fit-for-purpose method, strong institutional commitment, partial operational embedding, the need for clearer calibration guidance, and a growing demand for Alliance-level harmonisation. They are the foundation for a progressively more rigorous and institutionally embedded second cycle.

As one of the first fully operational examples of alliance-level QA applied to institutional transformation, the EUt+ SGH cycle offers a concrete reference point for the broader European conversation on how

quality assurance can evolve beyond compatibility - toward measurable convergence in an increasingly integrated European higher education space.