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Paper

How do you design quality assurance for something that does not yet fully exist? Lessons from emerging transnational excellence hubs

Abstract

European University alliances are developing new forms of transnational collaboration that challenge conventional quality assurance (QA) frameworks. Within UNINOVIS, an alliance of eight diverse higher education institutions established in 2025, Excellence Hubs are intended to connect education, research, innovation and external stakeholders through applied data science. Yet these hubs are still taking shape, progressing at different speeds and under different institutional conditions. How can QA ensure coherence and accountability when the structures being assessed are themselves evolving?

This contribution examines the hubs' early implementation (2025–2026), drawing on governance documents, implementation roadmaps, coordination records, workshop discussions and participant evaluations. The exploratory analysis considers how the hub concept translates into operational activities, how implementation challenges are identified, and whether monitoring informs subsequent adjustments.

Three emerging QA requirements are identified. First, iterative monitoring is needed to capture implementation barriers and reassess priorities beyond the completion of planned activities. Second, flexible indicators should combine common expectations with measures reflecting different institutional contexts and stages of development. Third, co-constructed QA should progressively involve academic staff, hub coordinators, learners and external stakeholders in defining and interpreting quality.

Importantly, operational adaptation does not automatically constitute evidence-informed improvement. The paper therefore explores how a PDCA-inspired approach could connect evaluation findings, collective interpretation, documented decisions and subsequent follow-up, while allowing QA instruments to evolve alongside the hubs.

Rather than proposing a validated model, the contribution invites discussion on how QA can remain robust, accountable and responsive within emerging transnational innovation ecosystems, including those developing flexible learning opportunities and micro-credentials.

1| Context and central question

European University alliances are increasingly developing new forms of collaboration that go beyond traditional programs and institutional structures. Among these, our young Alliance, launched in 2025, focusing on excellence in DATA science literacy, has as a backbone the aim to set up transnational “excellence hubs”. These are emerging as dynamic ecosystems that connect education, research, and the professional realm through challenge-based activities and innovation projects facilitated by partnerships with external stakeholders.

Despite being the raison d’être of our European university, our hubs are still in the process of being built, evolving unevenly across institutions and contexts. This raises a fundamental question: how can an overarching quality assurance system be designed for structures that are not yet fully defined, stabilized, or comparable?

Our contribution draws on the early-stage implementation of excellence hubs within a European University alliance, UNINOVIS, composed of a mix of institutions of applied sciences, where strong links to regional ecosystems, employers, and practice-oriented learning are central and generial institutions of Higher Education. While some hub activities are already emerging, such as hackathons, challenge-based learning initiatives, and collaborative projects with external partners, the overall model remains under construction.

2| Evidence, analytical approach and consultation

The analysis draws on documentary evidence generated during the early implementation of the UNINOVIS Excellence Hubs during the first phase of the project,2025-2026. This includes the Excellence Hub Core Group's governance arrangements, the 2026 implementation roadmap, and a series of coordination meeting presentations documenting the progressive organization of hub activities, research collaborations and joint initiatives. These sources are complemented by the evaluation of the March 2026 International Staff Week, which focused specifically on Living Labs and Excellence Hubs, and by selected quality assurance assessments of related alliance activities. Together, these materials provide insights into how the hubs are being conceptualized, coordinated, and progressively operationalized. The analysis is exploratory rather than a comprehensive evaluation of hub performance: it examines emerging implementation challenges and the extent to which existing monitoring and evaluation practices can support quality assurance while the structures themselves remain under development.

The analysis focuses on three dimensions of early implementation:

1| The translation of the Excellence Hub « project » concept into operational structures and activities;

2| The early and ongoing identification and follow-up of implementation challenges;

3| The relationship between monitoring, evaluation and subsequent adjustments.

The coordination materials were examined for changes in priorities, milestones, collaborative initiatives and reported progress. The March 2026 Staff Week provided an additional source of evidence through

facilitated workshops involving academic and administrative staff from seven partner institutions, alongside a post-event evaluation completed by 17 participants. These activities captured participants' perspectives on the practical conditions required to establish and sustain the hubs, including stakeholder engagement, institutional support, shared understanding and collaboration. The analysis also draws on observations arising from our quality assurance and monitoring responsibilities within the alliance. These perspectives should not, however, be interpreted as a systematic consultation of all hub coordinators, students, employers or external stakeholders.

3| Emerging findings and implications for quality assurance

Rather than presenting a mature system, we reflect here on how QA is being developed in parallel with implementation. It explores initial approaches to ensuring coherence across institutions, relevance to labor market needs and the capacity to monitor impact in evolving and heterogeneous environments. It also highlights key tensions, including uneven partner engagement, difficulties in defining shared indicators, and the challenge of assessing outcomes that are not yet fully measurable.

Why iterative monitoring?

The need for iterative monitoring emerges from the difference between the hubs' planned development and the practical challenges encountered during implementation. The 2026 Roadmap establishes common targets and milestones, while successive coordination meetings document the gradual development of working groups, research initiatives and challenge-based activities. However, the March Staff Week evaluation revealed that, despite progress in understanding the Living Lab and Excellence Hub concepts, participants continued to identify difficulties concerning operational roadmaps, institutional support, stakeholder identification and sustained engagement. This suggests that monitoring milestones alone cannot adequately capture the conditions determining whether the hubs become operational and sustainable. Periodic evaluation is therefore needed not only to establish whether activities have taken place, but also to identify emerging obstacles, assess the relevance of planned actions and reconsider priorities as implementation progresses.

Why flexible indicators?

The challenge of defining shared indicators arises from the tension between the alliance's common objectives and the different institutional and operational contexts in which the hubs are developing. The 2026 Roadmap identifies measurable targets, including research proposals and hackathons, which provide an essential basis for monitoring delivery. Yet these measures cannot, on their own, establish whether a hub is developing effective partnerships, generating meaningful research collaboration, responding to regional needs or creating sustainable opportunities for learners. The March Staff Week discussions further demonstrated that participants were still addressing foundational questions concerning the definition of hubs, stakeholder mapping, resources and institutional anchoring. Applying identical performance expectations without considering these differences risks confusing implementation maturity with quality. A more flexible approach could therefore combine a limited set of common indicators with context-sensitive measures reflecting each hub's developmental stage,

activities and intended outcomes, while retaining shared criteria for relevance, stakeholder engagement and demonstrable progress.

Why co-constructed quality assurance?

The case for co-constructed quality assurance is closely connected to the collaborative nature of the Excellence Hubs. Their intended activities span education, research, innovation and engagement with external stakeholders, bringing together actors with different responsibilities, expectations and understandings of quality. During Excellence Hubs' online and face-to-face meetings, participants identified stakeholder integration, business connections, knowledge sharing, institutional support, and local community engagement as important conditions for developing the hubs.

These discussions suggest that defining quality exclusively through central project indicators or administrative reporting would provide only a partial understanding of their effectiveness. At the same time, the evidence does not yet demonstrate that a systematic process of co-designing QA with all stakeholder groups is in place. The emerging proposition is therefore to involve hub coordinators, academic staff, learners and relevant external partners progressively in identifying meaningful quality criteria, interpreting evaluation findings and determining which improvements should be prioritized.

How iteration can support evidence-informed improvement

Iteration can help address the quality assurance challenges of emerging structures by creating regular opportunities to reassess not only progress against established objectives, but also the continued relevance of those objectives and the conditions required to achieve them. In the UNINOVIS Excellence Hubs, coordination and operational adjustments already take place as partnerships, activities and priorities develop. However, such adjustments are not necessarily informed by documented evaluation findings, nor do they automatically generate transferable learning. This distinction between adaptation and evidence-informed improvement is itself an important QA challenge. A PDCA-inspired approach could help address it by connecting four processes: establishing provisional objectives and quality criteria; gathering evidence from implementation and stakeholder experience; collectively examining what that evidence reveals; and documenting decisions and their subsequent consequences. Crucially, iteration would also allow indicators and evaluation questions to be revised as the hubs mature. Its contribution would therefore be less about introducing change into an already changing environment than about making the reasons for change, the evidence informing decisions and the learning generated through implementation more explicit and traceable.

5| An adjacent challenge: micro-credentials and lifelong learning

A related and adjacent challenge concerns the development of micro-credentials and lifelong learning offers within these hubs. As hubs begin to generate new forms of flexible, practice-oriented learning, targeted also at learners already in the workforce, questions arise regarding how to ensure their academic quality, relevance to rapidly evolving labor market needs & recognition across institutional and national contexts. In this context, the contribution also reflects on the co-design of emerging QA approaches to monitor the creation, quality, quantity, and relevance of such micro-credentials.

6| Discussion and concluding questions

By analyzing these early experiences, our paper identifies a set of emerging principles and practical approaches for designing quality assurance in innovation ecosystems that are still under construction. These include iterative monitoring frameworks, stakeholder-integrated evaluation methods, and governance mechanisms that balance flexibility with accountability.

Rather than presenting a fixed model, this contribution aims to foster discussion on how quality assurance can evolve to support emerging forms of collaboration between higher education and the world of work. It invites colleagues to reflect on the transferability of these approaches to their own contexts, and to collectively explore how QA frameworks can remain both robust and adaptable in rapidly evolving environments.

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