

CENTRES OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE – AN ENGINE FOR VET DEVELOPMENT?*

Executive summary



* The publication “Centres of Vocational Excellence – an engine for VET Development?” will be published early 2020

‘Excellence’ is a contested term.

Often perceived as a controversial concept that highlights the gap between good and bad, excellence in education also relates to expectations in delivering high-quality education.

Vocational excellence usually refers to high quality of training and education but also to relevance to the world of work and to the attractiveness of the educational offer to learners and to employers. *Vocational excellence* may also imply an enlarged, more comprehensive and inclusive conceptualisation of skills provision – addressing innovation, pedagogy, social justice, life-long learning, transversal skills, organisational and continuing professional learning and community needs. Sometimes, the term *vocational excellence* is instrumentalised in policy-making and made to serve as a euphemism for other reforms: rationalisation, restructuring of governance, cost-reduction, heightened accountability or greater competition.

Centres of vocational excellence (CoVE) are often represented as the institutions that embody vocational excellence. However, the purpose, structure and functions of CoVEs vary greatly from one context to another. Differences and similarities are often disguised by the use of specific terminologies and that which is lost in translation. CoVEs are assigned different roles in policy-making and enjoy different levels of political commitment and prioritisation of resources. Quite often, CoVEs exist in isolation without partnerships with other educational institutions at national and international level. Sometimes CoVEs are fundamentally skills providers – vocational schools or training centres – but sometimes they are coordination or development centres or networks rather than providers. ETF’s paper, “Centres of Vocational Excellence – an engine for VET Development?” tries to do justice to the contested understanding of vocational excellence, to the diversity of institutions that present themselves as CoVEs and to the varied and dynamic policy-making contexts where CoVEs are developing. The research suggests that there are two kinds of driver for the development of CoVEs: firstly, there is the pressure to make skills provision more responsive to the changing needs of industry, which typically favours more specialist skills providers that are deeply and extensively tied to the world of work, and secondly, there is the need to improve the performance of the whole skills provider network, which places emphasis on coordination, cooperation and strategic development of that network. This analysis confirms that different countries are using CoVEs to pursue different strategies and it can help policy-makers to consider some of the choices and trade-offs they must confront. It also sharpens our focus on the challenge of how and under what conditions these strategies can be combined so that CoVEs can both deepen their engagement with the labour market and cooperate with other skills providers to form part of a comprehensive, inclusive, high quality network. Further, the analysis encourages us to explore how the development and design of CoVEs can be linked to other elements of Human Capital Development strategy in a particular country, for example, the development of lifelong learning or the emergence of smart specialisation.

The ETF conceptual paper *Centres of Vocational Excellence – an engine for VET Development?* aims to discuss these questions by bringing together analyses of material collected from self-identifying CoVEs in three groups of countries: EU Member States, ETF’s partner countries and, more selectively, some other countries. It is based on the findings of the report prepared at the request of the European Commission in the Member States and the candidate countries, the ETF mapping exercise of CoVEs in partner countries, and desk research and hands-on experience in countries. While the evidence collected is not always comprehensive or fully validated, it has made it possible to explore the diversity of institutions, functions and policy contexts. The paper does not define exactly what CoVEs are because this term can mean different things in different contexts, especially in partner

countries. Instead, the paper investigates what the countries perceive to be CoVEs and tries to identify and map their characteristics, understand their scope, look into the drivers behind them and identify possible links that connect them with an overall effect on VET systems. In the study, we explore how and why policy makers are trying to bring about vocational excellence and, at the same time, we critically examine the potential of CoVEs to embody institutional excellence and/or to transmit excellence to other skills providers through coordination or collaboration. This sharing is not always the main purpose of CoVEs: the ETF and ECs mapping exercises reveal that in some countries the principal rationale is to develop the scope and performance of a single institution, usually by making it much more responsive to the needs of employers. However, in many countries, coordination or collaboration is essential to the concept of CoVEs which may be known as Regional Centres or Sectoral Hubs rather than CoVE.

The paper draws attention to the policy-making context of CoVEs. In many countries, policy-makers are seeking to optimise and modernise VET systems and networks. The development of CoVEs offers itself as a policy tool which is, at once, internationally credible, popular with stakeholders, incremental and relatively 'soft' from a regulatory and political perspective. Educational and training policy makers are confronting a number of challenges and it is understandable that they wish to construct a vision of CoVEs which can, somehow, simultaneously address all of these challenges. Skills needs are complex to measure and predict with precision and are typically localised. The responsiveness of vocational education systems depends not only on top-down planning, but on having a diversity of providers that are motivated and capable to meet changing demand for skills. In some countries, CoVEs are intended to meet this challenge: they are envisioned as VET institutions with extended or amplified functions that are capable of assuming wider and more diverse responsibilities for increasing the responsiveness and reputation of VET.

Policy makers also claim that CoVEs can enhance lifelong learning and permeability, perhaps by combining initial and continuing vocational training or by enhancing links with universities or with employers. Similarly, policy makers are ready to promote CoVEs because they are expected to generate or transmit innovation, support 'start-ups', and technology-driven economic growth or regeneration. The excellence embodied in CoVEs can help policy makers to make VET more attractive and to combat prejudices that regard it as 'second best'. Sometimes, but not often, it is employers that initiate partnerships with skills providers in order to address current or anticipated skills needs. It is more common, in ETF's partner countries, to find that policy makers are trying to modernise their skills provider network and that some kind of concept of CoVE is harnessed to support this reform. In these cases, the concept of a CoVE can help to offer a compelling vision, can help to attract international funding and partnership and, perhaps, providing that the reform is seen to work, can help to gradually build consensus between those actors whose support is needed for success.

ETF's analysis draws attention to the importance of governance and funding in the shaping and conceptualisation of CoVEs. Vocational excellence may be attributed to all or some of the following: higher funding, greater autonomy, better cooperation, more accountability, better leadership, better national planning, more federation. The establishment and development of CoVEs is sometimes driven by a policy decision to prioritise spending in a limited number of institutions in order to achieve a visible transformation or to take advantage of international funding or to try to mobilise investment on the part of industry. In some countries, CoVEs provide the opportunity to establish alternative channels for funding, for example, by bypassing municipal or local authorities, by setting up dedicated funding agencies or setting up public-private partnerships. It is important that policy makers consider the long-term implications of COVE funding mechanisms and commitments and that social partners

and other stakeholders are involved in setting up these systems. The mapping of CoVEs and other research into school improvement suggest that collaboration is often a key factor in the development or sharing of excellence. We have reviewed examples where there appear to be benefits for all or most participants from different kinds of cooperation. There is little evaluation or research that measures outputs of CoVEs in a rigorous manner, evaluates benefits in relation to costs or compares the net advantages of strategies involving CoVEs with those of other improvement strategies. Future investment in CoVEs would benefit from formative evaluation that is designed to inform and shape development. Decision-making and evaluation in relation to CoVEs should take into account the robust methodologies developed over many years by those working on School Effectiveness, Improvement, and Quality Assurance, which address the issue of school improvement more generally. The mapping of CoVEs also reveals that vocational schools acting individually or together can enlarge their performance, providing not only initial vocational education (IVET) but also enhanced services to their own students and their communities, as well as some services to other schools, employers, employees, unemployed people, etc. However, just because some vocational schools extend and enhance their offer, this does not mean that all schools should do so. Schools are not the only organisations capable of providing these additional services and they may not be the best qualified or most able. Taking on new functions usually implies new capabilities and investment, so there are costs as well as benefits.

The many examples profiled by the EC and the ETF in the two mapping studies confirm that CoVEs **can** be engines for VET development, unfortunately there have also been failures that demonstrate that CoVEs do not always deliver. ETF's research suggests that success depends **both** on smart choices at the level of the national framework for CoVEs, for example, in terms of structures and powers, **and** good decision making at institutional level, in terms of which functions or services are offered and how they are delivered. The policy objectives, the funding, the regulative framework and current capability of existing institutions must be aligned. There must be prioritisation, with decisions taken at appropriate levels: national, regional and institutional. Support, partnership and cooperation are essential if vocational excellence is, over time, to be accessed by all. This implies a shift from the development of single VET schools or CoVEs to the development of partnerships, clusters and networks of CoVEs (regional, national or transnational). The paper reveals many gaps in our knowledge: we are only at the beginning of understanding how CoVEs can and should be developed.

Our research places emphasis on agency of vocational schools: the role that they can play in advancing vocational excellence, both by deepening and extending their relationship with employers and by cooperating and coordinating with other skills providers – other schools, companies, universities, specialist development agencies and others. Where CoVEs are in development, policy makers, school leaders and their partners have to define the regulative framework, to agree objectives and responsibilities, leaving space for vocational schools to enhance, extend and innovate skills provision in cooperation with relevant partners. In the future, ETF will seek to build a shared understanding of what actors need to know and what capabilities they wish to improve, and explore how, through a network, these needs can be met. ETF's research confirms that there is an appetite for international networks and partnership. Skills providers increasingly want to equip learners with skills that will enable them to work for inwardly investing companies or in international labour markets. Some specialised schools, for example, maritime and aeronautical schools, have already obtained international accreditation, driven by the labour markets that they serve. International partnerships are also popular with teachers and learners – they offer great opportunities for learning. ETF's planned network for CoVEs will complement other platforms and networks and will help established and emerging CoVEs to access, share and absorb good practice.