

SKILLS ECOSYSTEM ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

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PREFACE

This toolkit has been developed by ETF as part of its Partnership under the ETF Network of Excellence (ENE)¹ to support Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) to become more entrepreneurial².

For this toolkit, a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) is conceptualised as a VET institution or a network of institutions with the aim of providing high-quality Vocational Education and Training (VET). CoVEs are designed to meet the needs of the labour market and societies and support the development of skills and competences for the present and future. They play a crucial role in fostering innovation, research, economic growth, public-private partnerships and social inclusion by aligning education and training with the demands of the industry and local -and international- labour market³.

The ETF Network for Excellence (ENE) is a network of CoVEs (meaning for this toolkit high-performing VET schools/ providers) aimed at fostering partnerships and peer learning activities among its members, working together towards learning - peer to peer - how to implement and transmit Vocational Excellence whilst working towards becoming recognised VET provider leaders in their respective contexts. It is designed to be a policy-oriented source of information and knowledge, focusing on vocational excellence and human capital development. The ENE project involves more than 300 CoVEs across more than 50 countries around the world, including ETF partner countries, EU member states, Sub-Saharan African nations, among others.

Within ENE, the Entrepreneurial CoVEs ('EntreCoVEs') initiative is a sub-thematic initiative / partnership of peer learning focused on fostering entrepreneurship within Centres of Vocational Excellence. The EntreCoVEs initiative aims to integrate entrepreneurial principles into the organisational practices, ecosystem engagement, teaching and learning processes, and the products and services of CoVEs. By doing so, it helps these centres identify and act on opportunities and ideas, transforming them into real-world initiatives that bring value to individuals, groups, and communities.

Between 2021 and 2024, the initiative involved several key components:

- **Conceptual Framework:** a detailed framework defining what constitutes an Entrepreneurial CoVE, including systemic entrepreneurial features infused across various aspects of the centre.
- **Self-Assessment Tool:** a tool for CoVEs to measure their level of entrepreneurial progress and set priorities for further improvement.
- **Peer Learning Sessions:** sessions to learn about innovative entrepreneurial approaches and share best practices among CoVEs.
- **Coaching Sessions:** individual support for each CoVE to produce new training products and identify new partners.
- **Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit:** a tool to help CoVEs activate new partnerships within their ecosystems.

The EntreCoVEs initiative has been instrumental in aligning CoVEs with modern educational standards and increasing the employability of their students by adopting entrepreneurial mindsets and skills. It also supports the establishment and facilitation of partnerships in the thematic area of entrepreneurial excellence.

The idea of this toolkit originates from the assumption that sound professional cooperation with the variety of stakeholders in the ecosystem is a crucial element for any CoVE to become more entrepreneurial according to the conceptual framework developed under the Partnership⁴.

¹ [Vocational excellence – ENE | ETF \(europa.eu\)](https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/vocational-excellence-ene)

² [Entrepreneurial centres of vocational excellence | ETF \(europa.eu\)](https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/entrepreneurial-centres-of-vocational-excellence)

³ ETF (2025 -forthcoming publication)

⁴ [Conceptual framework of entrepreneurial centres of vocational excellence | ETF \(europa.eu\)](https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/conceptual-framework-of-entrepreneurial-centres-of-vocational-excellence)

It is important however, to highlight that the Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit is indeed versatile and can be applied to various thematic areas beyond entrepreneurship. While it was initially designed to help Centres of Vocational Excellence engage their ecosystems in entrepreneurial activities, its principles and methodologies have a broad application.

The toolkit provides a systematic framework for evaluating and ranking partnerships, facilitating relationship-building, and maintaining ongoing engagement with selected partners. In addition, these core functionalities can be adapted to other thematic areas such as digitalisation, social inclusion, or greening VET. The approach taken in the toolkit to stakeholder analysis, network mapping, and ecosystem dynamics can be beneficial to various sectors. It supports CoVEs in improving their functions and services, such as lifelong learning, incubation, and self-governance. This adaptability makes it a valuable resource for any initiative that requires strategic planning and effective stakeholder engagement.

This toolkit is composed of tools that have been selected by ETF to better serve the needs of the Partnership. Its use has been piloted with five CoVEs across ETF Partner countries, namely in Georgia, Moldova, Morocco, North Macedonia, and Tunisia.

The aim of sharing this toolkit is to inspire other CoVEs and support them with practical tools.

Further work could be considered to improve the toolkit for other specific needs.

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1. Introduction

The development and testing of the [Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit](#) involved a systematic and collaborative approach. The toolkit was designed to help CoVEs better engage their ecosystems by identifying, prioritising, and cultivating partnerships. Here is an overview of the process:

Development

1. **Conceptual Development:** the toolkit was conceptualised to provide a systematic framework for evaluating and ranking partnerships to allocate resources effectively. It incorporates mechanisms to facilitate relationship-building and maintain ongoing engagement with selected partners.
2. **Integration of Insights:** the development process involved integrating insights from ecosystem mapping, which includes stakeholder analysis, network mapping, and ecosystem dynamics. This ensures that the toolkit embodies core principles and methodologies for informed decision-making and strategic planning.

Testing

1. **Coaching Sessions:** the toolkit was tested through tailored coaching sessions provided to CoVEs. These sessions included practical applications of the toolkit and reported the findings and recommendations for each CoVE and for the ETF.
2. **Pilot Testing:** the toolkit was also pilot tested in various CoVEs to assess its functionality and impact. This involved evaluating the toolkit's ability to identify potential partners, prioritise collaborative value, and foster long-lasting relationships.
3. **Feedback and Iteration:** the final version of the toolkit was refined based on feedback from these coaching sessions. The feedback was incorporated to ensure the toolkit's effectiveness and usability.

The final version of the toolkit was shared with stakeholders for further feedback and refinement, to ensure that it meets the needs of the CoVEs and supports their ecosystem engagement efforts effectively.

1.1 Why do we need this toolkit?

While efforts have been made to help VET institutions identify and categorise stakeholders⁵, there is a gap in guidance for Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions on strategic communication, engagement and relationship building. This often leads to ad hoc, transactional collaboration primarily focused on the exchange of readily quantifiable benefits, such as providing affordable skilled labour in return for curriculum updates or infrastructure improvements. While this model may address some urgent needs, it significantly underutilises the vast potential that lies within stakeholder relationships.

Furthermore, many VET institutions, particularly those under state control, tend to adopt an inward focus, primarily seeking to have their own needs addressed, rather than proactively identifying and addressing shared interests or challenges with stakeholders. While some schools are actively working to overcome these challenges, this inward-looking approach, often coupled with limited resources and varying levels of strategic planning expertise among school management teams, can make it challenging for many to fully explore and capitalise on the diverse opportunities that stakeholder engagement can offer. A broader shift towards a more collaborative and outward-facing approach could unlock the potential for co-creating innovative solutions, accessing new resources, and enhancing the overall capacity and reputation of the VET sector.

An entrepreneurial mindset, characterised by proactivity, innovation, and value co-creation, is essential for the VET sector to establish effective stakeholder relationships. This mindset enables

⁵ See TalentJourney (2020) and ILO (2023)

schools to overcome traditional boundaries allowing them to become active contributors of value for diverse stakeholders.

Critically, VET institutions must recognise and address the varying attitudes that stakeholders may hold towards potential partnerships:

- **Patronising:** viewing potential partners as needing help due to their own perceived superiority, with little respect for the potential value these institutions could offer.
- **Admiring:** seeking to learn from partners such as international consulting firms or global players and viewing them with significant admiration and respect.
- **Intrigued:** recognising a partner's potential for innovation or problem-solving, regardless of its size, financial strength or role.

To foster truly effective partnerships, VET institutions must work to shift stakeholder perceptions from patronising to intrigued. This requires proactively demonstrating their capacity for problem-solving and value creation. By doing so, they can overcome their traditional inward focus and position themselves as dynamic, valuable partners in the eyes of diverse stakeholders.

1.2 Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit Objectives

To empower Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) as proactive leaders to co-create value in their complex -skills- ecosystems, we present the Skills Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit. Built upon an understanding of best practices in entrepreneurial ecosystem development and the human-centred principles of Design Thinking, this tool is a strategic roadmap for CoVEs to navigate and collaborate within their unique environments.

More specifically, the Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit is designed to support CoVEs in three key areas:

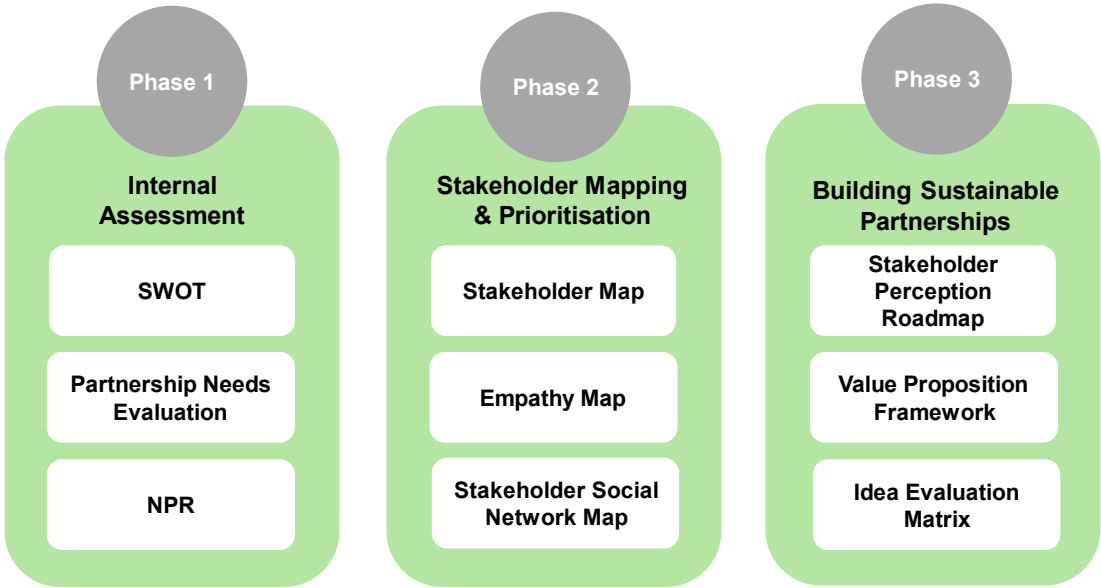
- **Identifying Potential Partners:** the tool facilitates the discovery of potential partners from diverse sectors, including corporations, start-ups, government agencies, educational institutions, NGOs, communities, and other relevant stakeholders.
- **Prioritising Value-Driven Collaborations:** it provides a framework to assess partnerships based on their potential to deliver mutual benefits. This assessment considers in-depth analyses of stakeholders, understanding their motivations, challenges, and aspirations. CoVEs should then align strategic directions and prioritise collaborations offering the greatest value to both parties.
- **Building Sustainable Relationships:** the tool offers guidance and resources to nurture strong, long-term partnerships. This includes communication tools and strategies for continuous growth and shared success.

1.3 Three Phases of Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit

The Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit is a structured three-phase approach that helps CoVEs understand their internal landscape, strategically identify stakeholders, and engage effectively for sustainable partnerships. The toolkit guides CoVEs through a three-phase approach:

- **Phase 1 - Internal Assessment:** evaluate internal strengths, weaknesses, and potential partnership opportunities.
- **Phase 2 - Stakeholder Mapping & Prioritisation:** categorise and prioritise key stakeholders to identify opportunities for value co-creation.
- **Phase 3 - Building Sustainable Partnerships:** identify reputation goals, enhance communication, and leverage value propositions to foster lasting partnerships.

Diagram 1. The Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit with its phases and instruments



2. PHASE 1 - INTERNAL ASSESSMENT

This section explores the essential tools and frameworks that empower CoVEs to gain a comprehensive understanding of their internal landscape, partnership needs, and reputation.

We will explore the following instruments in detail:

1. **SWOT Analysis:** a tool for identifying internal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
2. **Partnership Needs Analysis:** a framework for clearly defining the specific types of support required from external partners.
3. **Net Promoter Score (NPS) Assessment:** a metric for measuring stakeholder satisfaction and loyalty, providing valuable insights into the CoVE's reputation.

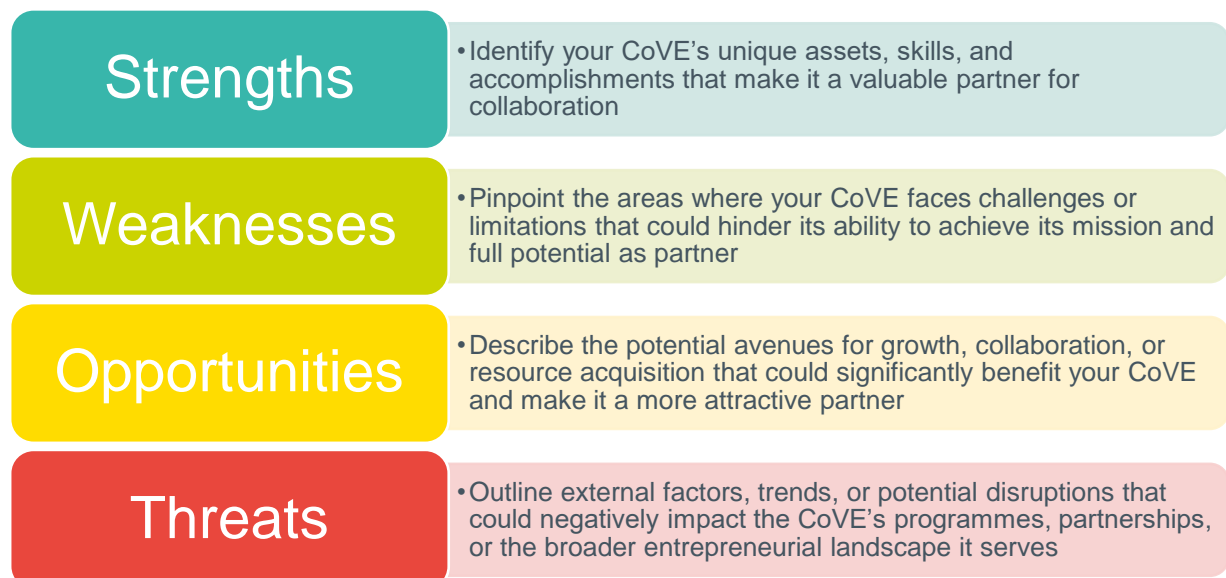
By utilising these instruments, CoVEs can cultivate a deep understanding of their organisation, setting the ground for strategic decision-making and effective stakeholder engagement.

2.1 SWOT Analysis

While the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework is well-known, its application within the context of entrepreneurial ecosystem engagement requires a different lens. The goal is not merely to list attributes but to strategically assess the CoVE's capabilities to identify and seize opportunities, mobilise resources, and execute ideas with an entrepreneurial mindset. This involves analysing the CoVE's strengths and weaknesses in areas such as innovation, resource mobilisation, leadership and culture. For example:

- **Innovation:** how effectively does the CoVE generate and implement new ideas?
- **Resource Mobilization:** how skilled is the CoVE in attracting and managing resources (financial, human, etc.)?
- **Partnerships:** what is CoVE's track record in building and maintaining partnerships?
- **Leadership:** does the CoVE have strong leadership with an entrepreneurial vision?
- **Culture:** does the CoVE foster a culture of innovation and risk-taking?

Diagram 2. SWOT framework



Potential Pitfalls in CoVEs' SWOT Assessments

The SWOT assessments in six CoVEs in Georgia, North Macedonia, Tunisia, Morocco, and Moldova revealed the following pitfalls:

- **Overestimating the uniqueness of offerings without considering similar programmes or resources available at other institutions.** In a competitive landscape, it is crucial for CoVEs to understand how their offerings compare to those of other institutions. Are there other CoVEs or educational providers offering similar programmes or resources? If so, what sets the CoVE apart? What unique advantages or value-added does it bring to the table? By conducting a thorough competitive analysis, CoVEs can identify their true differentiators and tailor their value proposition accordingly. This ensures that their offerings stand out in the market and appeal to potential partners seeking specific expertise or capabilities.
- **Moving Beyond Traditional Reputation Metrics.** CoVEs often gauge their reputation through surveys of existing students and alumni. However, this approach can be misleading as it fails to capture genuine attitudes and perceptions. Research indicates that respondents may not always provide truthful answers in surveys, potentially skewing results. To address this issue, the coaching programme recommended a behaviour science-backed approach to reputation assessment, and specifically using the Net Promoter Score (NPS).
- **Neglecting External Validation.** While students and alumni contribute significantly to a CoVE's reputation, it is equally important to consider the perceptions of existing stakeholders such as industry partners or communities.
- **Underestimating Qualitative Feedback.** Relying solely on surveys can be limiting, so the coaching programme emphasised the value of in-depth interviews or focus groups to gather qualitative feedback and gain a deeper understanding of stakeholder attitudes.
- **Overcoming barriers of innovation.** Overlooking internal barriers to innovation is very common among schools. Many educational organisations struggle to create an environment where innovation thrives due to hierarchical structures, risk aversion, or a lack of incentives for experimentation. During the coaching sessions, exploration of the High Involvement Innovation (HII) concept was recommended to CoVEs. This framework provides a detailed roadmap for training the 'innovation muscle' within an organisation, outlining steps to ensure that innovation becomes a collective effort embedded in the organisation's culture, rather than relying on the efforts of a single individual or department.
- **Ignoring Cultural Nuances.** Organisations are often not explicitly aware of their own culture, as it is deeply ingrained in their daily operations and interactions. Therefore, it is crucial for CoVEs to actively assess and understand their existing culture to identify any potential barriers to the entrepreneurial mindset. This can involve conducting surveys or interviews: gathering feedback from staff and students about their perceptions of the CoVE's culture, values, and practices, observing behaviours and interactions: analysing how decisions are made, how conflicts are resolved, and how information is shared within the CoVE. CoVEs can identify policies or procedures that may discourage an entrepreneurial mindset.
- **Disengaged Staff.** CoVEs may not always have an accurate picture of staff morale. Traditional feedback mechanisms such as surveys may not capture the full extent of disengagement, as employees may be reluctant to express their true feelings due to fear of repercussions or a belief that their opinions are not valued. This can create a hidden problem that, if left unaddressed, can erode the quality of education and hinder the CoVE's ability to innovate and adapt.
- **Visibility and Marketing.** CoVEs often lack the internal resources and expertise to develop and execute comprehensive strategies in this area. Additionally, the responsibility for public outreach and reputation management is often fragmented, with no dedicated personnel overseeing these critical functions. This can lead to inconsistent messaging, missed opportunities, and a lack of overall strategic direction in building and maintaining a strong brand identity.

- **Understanding Risks Related to Funding Dependency.** Some CoVEs may underestimate the risks associated with funding dependency, delaying efforts to diversify their revenue streams.
- **Lack of Skills to Identify Alternative Revenue Opportunities.** CoVEs may lack the knowledge and skills required to identify and pursue alternative funding sources, and delay developing sustainable revenue models and achieving financial self-sufficiency. Seeking external expertise or training in fundraising and revenue generation can be beneficial for addressing this gap.
- **Internal Resistance to Overcome Reliance on Government Funding.** Shifting away from a reliance on government funding can also be met with resistance from internal stakeholders accustomed to the status quo. Overcoming this resistance may require strong leadership, clear communication of the benefits of diversification, and a willingness to experiment with new approaches. It is important for CoVEs to set realistic expectations and understand that diversifying funding sources takes time and effort, and that significant progress in reducing reliance on external funding may take several years.
- **Wrong Metrics.** CoVEs may prioritise easily quantifiable metrics, such as the number of students enrolled or events organised, without considering their actual impact on student learning, employability, or entrepreneurial success. These ‘vanity metrics’ can create a false sense of progress while masking underlying challenges or shortcomings in programme effectiveness.
- **Comprehensive Evaluation Framework.** To overcome these pitfalls, CoVEs should develop a comprehensive evaluation framework that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data. This framework should be aligned with the CoVE’s strategic goals and objectives, and it should measure outcomes across multiple dimensions, including student learning, employability, entrepreneurial success, community engagement, and stakeholder satisfaction. By collecting and analysing robust data, CoVEs can gain a deeper understanding of their impact, identify areas for improvement, and make informed decisions that drive continuous growth and development.

Avoiding these common mistakes ensure that CoVEs can proceed with an accurate picture of their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

2.2 Partnership Needs Analysis

Partnership Needs framework empowers CoVEs to strategically identify and articulate their specific needs, streamlining targeted outreach and informed decision-making when seeking partnerships and resources. By systematically assessing and prioritising these needs across various areas like funding, expertise, technology, and community integration, CoVEs can forge stronger, mutually beneficial collaboration that align with their goals and drive sustainable growth.

While this framework primarily caters to an internal focus, it serves as an excellent starting point for institutions to identify common value co-creation opportunities with potential partners.

Table 1. Partnership Needs Analysis Framework

Need Category	Questions to Consider
Funding	What specific types of grants, scholarships, or sponsorships are most needed, and what are the ideal sources (foundations, government, industry), and why?
Expertise	What industry skills or knowledge gaps exist in the current curriculum, and why? What specific roles could mentors or advisors play?
Opportunities	What kind of internships, placements, or research collaborations would benefit our students and enhance their career prospects?
Advocacy	Are there policies at local or national level that impact CoVEs? Could alliances with other institutions or associations amplify the voice of CoVEs?
Technology & Infrastructure	Does the CoVE have access to up-to-date technology (software, prototyping labs, etc.), and facilities adequate to support its evolving programmes?

Need Category	Questions to Consider
Reputation & Visibility	How is the CoVE perceived within the ecosystem, and does it have effective channels to attract the right partners and students?
Alumni Engagement	Does the CoVE have a robust alumni network that can provide mentorship, potential collaborations, or contribute to its growth?
Staff Development	Does the CoVE support opportunities for faculty professional growth, industry exposure, and research, ensuring that teaching remains innovative and relevant?
Data & Evaluation:	Does the CoVE have the capacity to collect and analyse data on its student outcomes, programme impact, and industry needs?
Adaptability	Can the CoVE quickly pivot its curriculum, programmes, or outreach strategies in response to a rapidly changing entrepreneurial landscape?
Community Integration	Is the CoVE deeply embedded within its local community? Does it have strong connections to underserved populations or potential entrepreneurs who might be overlooked?
Other Needs	What are other partnership needs that the CoVE could pursue? How and why these needs important?

2.3 Net Promoter Score (NPS) Assessment

Net Promoter Score (NPS) is a powerful metric that goes beyond measuring mere customer satisfaction. It quantifies the number of active supporters a company has—those who are not only satisfied but so enthusiastic that they willingly recommend the company to others.

In today's interconnected world, where information flows freely and opinions are shaped by peers, trust in traditional authorities such as organisations, politicians, and brands has eroded. Instead, people trust the recommendations of their peers, even those they have never met. This shift in influence has made cultivating a base of loyal advocates essential for any organisation's success. These active supporters, often called 'promoters', are the lifeblood of an organisation. They are more loyal, more forgiving, and more likely to defend an organisation's reputation when it matters most. They are the ones who shape public perceptions and drive future growth through positive communication by word-of-mouth. Research has shown that people who truly care about a company or its products are far more likely to give it high marks (9 or 10) on the NPS scale⁶. These individuals are the promoters, the ones who will actively recommend an organisation to others, defend its reputation, and drive future growth. On the other hand, those who are indifferent or apathetic tend to give scores of 7 or 8. While not actively harmful, they are also less likely to contribute to an organisation's success through word-of-mouth marketing. Finally, those who are genuinely dissatisfied or angry will give scores of 1 to 6, marking them as detractors who may actively discourage others from engaging with a brand.

Unlike traditional surveys or focus groups, which capture a snapshot of customer sentiment, NPS measures the likelihood of customers actively advocating for the company. This metric is a more accurate predictor of future sustainability and reputation because it focuses on the most passionate and influential customers.

It is important to note that while neutral respondents (those who score 7 or 8) may not seem to add value, they are actually crucial to your overall NPS strategy. Research has shown that it is far easier to convert a neutral customer into a promoter than it is to transform a detractor into a supporter. Therefore, understanding and engaging with these neutral individuals can significantly impact an organisation's overall NPS score and customer base.

In essence, NPS is not just about measuring satisfaction; it is about quantifying the power of advocacy. It reveals how many true champions a company has, those who will stand by it through thick and thin and actively promote its products or services to others. In an era where trust is paramount, having a strong base of promoters is the key to building a sustainable and resilient brand.

⁶ See Reichheld (2003) in <https://hbr.org/2003/12/the-one-number-you-need-to-grow>

How is NET Promoter score calculated?

The NPS formula is designed to distil complex customer feedback into a simple, actionable metric:

NPS = % of Promoters - % of Detractors

- **Promoters (9-10):** these customers are emotionally connected to the brand, feeling a sense of loyalty, trust, and enthusiasm. They are the most likely to recommend the company to others.
- **Passives (7-8):** these customers are satisfied but lack a strong emotional bond. They may be easily swayed by competitors.
- **Detractors (0-6):** these customers are dissatisfied and may harbour negative emotions towards the brand. They are unlikely to recommend the company and may even discourage others from engaging with it.

By focusing on the difference between promoters and detractors, NPS provides a clear indicator of customer loyalty and the potential for growth.

NPS in the Education Sector

Educational institutions can leverage NPS to gain valuable insights into stakeholder satisfaction and loyalty, by potentially replacing or complementing traditional surveys. By aligning NPS questions with the specific expectations of their target audience, they can gather actionable data to improve their offerings.

Clarifying Expectations

The first step is to identify the key criteria that stakeholders value in education. For the sake of this exercise, let's assume these criteria are: employability, networking opportunities, modern knowledge, and alignment with values. While these are often cited as key factors, schools should conduct thorough research to confirm these assumptions and uncover any additional criteria relevant to their specific context.

Formulating NPS Questions

Once the key criteria are identified, the NPS questions can be tailored to address each aspect. Please note that by incorporating the justification for questions is crucial for gaining deeper insights into the factors driving stakeholder perceptions.

Examples

Employability: one of the goals of an educational or training institution is to equip its students with the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to secure and succeed in meaningful employment after graduation. This encompasses factors such as career services, internship opportunities, industry partnerships, and the overall relevance of the curriculum to the current job market.

- 'On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend our institution to someone seeking to enhance their career prospects?'
- 'Please briefly explain the reason for your rating.' (Open-ended question to gather qualitative feedback)
- 'How likely are you to recommend our institution to a potential employer?'
- 'Please briefly explain the reason for your rating.' (Open-ended question to gather qualitative feedback)

Networking Opportunities: the ability to build meaningful connections with peers, alumni, faculty, and industry professionals can significantly impact career prospects and personal development.

- 'On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend our institution for its valuable networking opportunities?'
- 'Please briefly explain the reason for your rating.'

Modern Knowledge: in today's rapidly changing world, students need access to cutting-edge knowledge and skills that are relevant to the current job market and societal challenges.

- 'On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend our institution to someone seeking cutting-edge knowledge and skills?'
- 'Please briefly explain the reason for your rating.'

Alignment with Values: students and stakeholders often seek educational institutions that align with their personal values and beliefs, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

- 'On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend our institution to someone who shares your values and beliefs?'
- 'Please briefly explain the reason for your rating.'

Importance of Qualitative Information

The qualitative feedback gathered through NPS surveys provides actionable insights for educational institutions. By analysing the reasons behind each score, schools can identify specific areas that are driving satisfaction or dissatisfaction, allowing them to develop targeted strategies for improvement. This feedback can uncover specific pain points, areas for improvement, and unique opportunities for differentiation, regardless of industry benchmarks. By identifying patterns and themes in the feedback, schools can prioritise actions that address common concerns or enhance areas of strength.

For example, if a school discovers that neutral attitudes are primarily linked to non-inspiring experiences with school management, they can proactively address this issue. They could initiate training programmes for administrators, implement new communication channels for student concerns, or create opportunities for student input in decision-making processes. By actively engaging with neutral students and addressing their concerns, the school can potentially transform them into enthusiastic promoters.

Benchmarking

The quantitative Net Promoter Score (NPS) acts as a valuable guide for educational institutions, indicating their overall performance and standing within the educational landscape. It allows them to benchmark and track progress over time, prioritise areas for improvement, and effectively communicate their position to stakeholders.

By establishing internal benchmarks, schools can compare scores across different departments, programmes, or campuses within the institution, revealing areas of relative strength and weakness. Tracking NPS scores over time allows for measuring improvement and evaluating the impact of specific initiatives. Even a small positive change in the score can be a significant indicator of progress.

Additionally, conducting external research can provide valuable context for interpreting NPS scores. Gathering information on student and employer expectations within the specific region or field of study can help schools understand how their scores relate to the broader educational landscape. Reaching out to industry associations or organisations for insights on trends and best practices can further inform improvement efforts. To gain further competitive insights, schools can also include a question in their NPS survey about the reputation of specific competitors among their stakeholders. This can provide valuable information on how the school is perceived relative to its peers and identify potential areas where it can differentiate itself.

The most effective use of NPS is in combining both quantitative and qualitative data. The score provides a clear direction, while the detailed feedback highlights the specific steps needed to get there. This holistic approach allows institutions to make informed decisions based on both objective metrics and the nuanced perspectives of their stakeholders, ultimately creating a more student-centric and successful educational environment.

3. PHASE 2 – STAKEHOLDER MAPPING AND PRIORITISATION

This phase is dedicated to understanding the external landscape that surrounds the CoVE. By identifying and empathising with key stakeholders, CoVEs can build stronger, more mutually beneficial relationships.

We will explore the following instruments in detail:

1. **Stakeholder Mapping:** a systematic approach to identifying and categorising stakeholders based on their potential role in the CoVEs' ecosystem
2. **Stakeholder Social Networking Map:** a framework uncovering hidden connections and influential networks within the CoVEs' internal stakeholder landscape.
3. **Empathy Mapping:** a framework for diving into the motivations, pain points, and aspirations of individual stakeholders, enabling CoVEs to tailor engagement strategies that resonate and create value.

By utilising these instruments, CoVEs can foster a deep understanding of their stakeholders, transitioning from an inward focus to becoming active contributors of value for diverse groups.

3.2 Stakeholder Mapping

The Stakeholder Map incorporates the ILO's framework (ILO 2023) for ecosystem analysis, categorising stakeholders as Thinkers, Informers, Funders, and Implementers. Although the ILO's framework was not designed specifically for vocational education, the concept can be adapted to the context of Entrepreneurial CoVEs (CoVEs).

Thinkers

The 'Thinker' role aligns well with individuals or organisations that actively generate knowledge that informs CoVE practices and contributes to the broader field of entrepreneurship education. The 'Thinker' function extends beyond just conducting research. It includes publishing findings, sharing insights with stakeholders, and influencing CoVE practices or policy development.

Here are some potential 'Thinkers' within a CoVEs' ecosystem:

Internal Thinkers	External Thinkers
Faculty with Research Focus: CoVE faculty members engaged in research on entrepreneurship education, skills development, or the impact of CoVEs on regional economic development.	Research Partners: Universities, think-tanks, or research institutions collaborating with the CoVE on specific projects or conducting joint studies of the CoVE's impact.
Data Analytics Teams: Units within the CoVE that analyse student performance data, track graduate outcomes, and identify trends in the local entrepreneurial landscape.	Industry Experts: Entrepreneurs, business leaders, or consultants who actively analyse and contribute to the conversation around entrepreneurial skills, market trends, and the evolution of the business landscape.

Examples

- A CoVE faculty member who publishes research on the effectiveness of specific teaching methodologies used in the CoVE's curriculum.
- A data analytics team within a CoVE that analyses student performance data and identifies areas where the curriculum needs to be adjusted to better align with industry needs.
- A research partnership between a CoVE and a local university to study the impact of CoVE graduates on local business start-ups.

- A prominent entrepreneur who is invited to speak at a CoVE and shares insights on emerging trends and the future of work.
- Local Chambers of Commerce: these organisations often collect data on the local business climate, analyse workforce trends, and can identify gaps that the CoVE could address.
- Business Incubators/Accelerators: these spaces often serve as innovation hubs. They can offer insights into emerging technologies, market trends, and the challenges faced by early-stage start-ups.
- Government Agencies (Economic Development): departments and agencies focused on promoting economic growth may have data, reports, and insights that can inform CoVE strategies for local workforce development.
- Community Leaders: respected individuals within the community who have their pulse on the evolving needs of the local economy, challenges facing the population, and potential areas for entrepreneurial solutions.
- By identifying potential 'Thinkers' within and beyond their immediate network, CoVEs can leverage this knowledge base to inform strategic decision-making, programme development, and ultimately, enhance the effectiveness of their entrepreneurial education initiatives.
- CoVEs should think beyond traditional academic institutions when seeking 'Thinkers'. Local businesses, industry groups, and even community activists can provide valuable perspectives. Encourage 'Thinkers' to share their insights through workshops, guest lectures, mentorship programmes, or contributions to a CoVE-focused publication or blog.

Informers/Advisors

Informers and advisors play a crucial role within a CoVE's ecosystem. They influence CoVE programmes and decision-making by providing up-to-date data and context specific advice. For example, relevant statistics, industry trends, and market insights help CoVEs make informed decisions about their curriculum and programme offerings or direct guidance and tailored recommendations can support the CoVE in designing effective programmes, aligning with real-world needs, and optimising the outcomes for students.

Internal Informers/Advisors	External Informers/Advisors
Industry Advisory Boards: panels of industry experts, business leaders, and successful entrepreneurs. They provide insights on workforce demands, emerging skill needs, and industry trends.	Industry Associations: organisations representing specific industries or professions, providing sector-specific data and information on emerging skill requirements.
Alumni Mentors: former CoVE graduates who are actively working in the entrepreneurial field. They offer practical advice to current students and insights on real-world market challenges.	Business Mentorship Programs: local or regional initiatives that connect experienced business mentors with aspiring CoVE students.
Career Development Centres: units within a CoVE that track graduate outcomes, employment trends, and can advise on aligning curriculum with job market realities.	Economic Development Agencies: government or NGO groups focused on fostering entrepreneurship. They can offer data on regional strengths, economic forecasts, and funding opportunities.
	Consultants: specialised firms or individuals offering tailored expertise in areas such as curriculum design, market analysis, programme evaluation, or strategic planning.

Examples

- Local Economic Development Data Hubs: government agencies or public-private partnerships may maintain websites or publish regular reports on local job market trends, workforce demographics, and industry growth projections.

- **Niche Industry Blogs and Publications:** online resources dedicated to specific industries can provide valuable updates on emerging trends, technological disruptions, and shifting skills' requirements.
- **Alumni Networks (Beyond Mentorship):** CoVE alumni communities can serve as informants if there is a structured mechanism for them to share industry insights, market changes, and new business opportunities they observe in their workplaces.
- **Student-Led Market Research Projects:** CoVEs themselves can become informants by engaging students in market research projects focused on identifying gaps and opportunities within the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.
- **Social Impact Advisors:** organisations or consultants focused on social entrepreneurship, sustainable business models, or impact investing. They help CoVEs integrate social impact principles into their curriculums and support students interested in launching purpose-driven enterprises.
- **Marketing and Branding Advisors:** marketing agencies, branding experts, or communication professionals who specialise in helping new businesses or start-ups. They provide insights on market positioning, branding strategies, and effective communication techniques. A marketing agency focused on start-up launches, or a freelance branding consultant with a track record in the entrepreneurial space.
- **Specialized Freelance Consultants:** CoVEs may find affordable consulting on short-term projects from freelancers specialising in curriculum design, market research, or financial modelling for start-ups.
- **Retired Entrepreneurs and Executives:** experienced individuals eager to give back may offer advisory services on a pro bono or reduced-fee basis. Local business associations or chambers of commerce might help connect CoVEs with such resources.
- **University Innovation Centres:** some universities have dedicated centres focused on technology transfer, start-up incubation, or commercialising research. They could advise CoVEs on integrating entrepreneurial concepts into technical programmes.
- **Government and International Donor Small Business Support Programs:** Many governments and donors offer small business development centres, grant programmes, or technical assistance initiatives that include access to advisors and mentors.
- **Community Engagement Advisors:** experts on community outreach, stakeholder engagement, and strategic partnerships. They help CoVEs become integrated into their local communities, identify collaboration opportunities, and build strong networks.

It is important for CoVEs to seek informers and advisors with varied experiences and not limit themselves to established firms or institutions. Freelance platforms, informal networks, and less conventional sources can yield valuable expertise. This will provide a well-rounded understanding of the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Funders

Funders provide essential financial resources to support the development and implementation of Entrepreneurial CoVE initiatives. They invest in programmes that align with their mission, ensuring that CoVEs have the means to train students, foster innovation, and contribute to economic development.

Internal Funders	External Funders
While less common, it is still possible to identify potential funding sources within a CoVE's internal structures	Foundations with an interest in entrepreneurship education, innovation, youth empowerment, or economic development within the CoVE's geographic region. A mix of smaller local foundations and larger national foundations with broader funding priorities.
Revenue-Generating Programs: some CoVEs may offer continuing education courses, fee-based workshops, or contract training services for businesses. The revenue generated can reinvest in core CoVE programmes or initiatives.	Government Agencies Targeted Programmes: grant opportunities specifically designed for CoVEs, vocational training initiatives, or supporting underserved populations within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Investigate funding sources at the local, state/regional, and national levels.
Incubation/Accelerator Programs: if a CoVE runs an incubator or accelerator, successful start-ups may give back by providing mentorship, provide funding, or sponsor student scholarships and initiatives.	Bilateral and Multilateral Donors Agencies and programmes focused on the CoVE's specific strengths (such as technical training, women's entrepreneurship, etc.) and the broader economic development goals of their region.
Alumni Networks: successful CoVE alumni who become entrepreneurs or business leaders may become donors, supporting specific programs, scholarships, or infrastructure improvements at a CoVE.	Other Potential Sources Industry Alignment: CoVEs can approach companies with an interest in the type of skilled workforce that the CoVE produces. This has benefits for their talent pipeline.
	Individual Impact: local entrepreneurs or philanthropists with a passion for education and community development.

Examples

- International Development Agencies: programmes through organisations such as USAID, the World Bank, or the EU, focused on women's economic empowerment, access to capital, and small business development.
- Specialised Foundations: foundations dedicated to female entrepreneurship, microfinancing initiatives, or social enterprises.
- Microfinancing Institutions: while not being grant-providers, these could be valuable partners in providing access to financial services for CoVE students or graduates for launching businesses.
- Local/Regional Foundations: community foundations focused on rural economic development, agricultural innovation, or sustainable food systems.
- Government Grants: USDA programmes promoting rural entrepreneurship, value-added agriculture, or farm-to-market initiatives.
- Industry Sponsorships: agricultural companies, food processors, or equipment manufacturers interested in building a skilled local workforce and supporting innovation in the sector.
- National Foundations: foundations dedicated to technology education, digital skills training, or fostering innovation in specific industries.
- Corporate Foundations: tech companies with foundations for supporting STEM education, start-up ecosystems, or diversity initiatives in technology.
- Angel Investors/Venture Funds: while not being traditional 'fund providers', CoVEs may cultivate relationships with investors interested in mentoring student entrepreneurs and potentially investing in promising start-ups emerging from a CoVE.

It is important to build relationships with fund providers as they do not just give money but they invest in a vision. CoVEs should nurture relationships with potential funders long before applying for grants. It is recommended to thoroughly research each funder's criteria, priorities, and past grants to ensure that the CoVE's project is a good fit. Then it should craft a strong proposal for funding showcasing the CoVE's unique value proposition, expected outcomes, and potential impact.

Implementers

Implementers are the ones who bring about change and deliver the CoVE's programmes and initiatives. They use the knowledge, advice, and resources from other stakeholders to deliver on-the-ground action.

CoVEs often have the most impact when they implement programmes in partnership with other stakeholders within their ecosystem. The CoVE itself can become an 'implementer' by acting as a central point of connection, fostering collaborations, and facilitating knowledge exchange within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Internal Implementers	External Implementers
CoVE Faculty and Staff: the core implementers are the instructors, facilitators, program managers, and other CoVE personnel who design and deliver the entrepreneurial curriculum, workshops, and student support services.	NGOs and Community Organisations: organisations specialising in workforce development, small business support, or specific community needs (underserved groups, rural development) may partner with the CoVE on joint initiatives.
Entrepreneurship Centres within CoVEs: dedicated centres or programmes within the CoVE focused on incubation, acceleration, mentorship, or providing resources such as makerspaces.	Business Networks: industry associations, chambers of commerce, or local business groups that collaborate with the CoVE to offer internships, mentorship, or applied learning experiences.
	Other Educational Institutions: partnerships with universities, research centres, or other vocational schools can enhance the CoVE's resources, expertise, or student opportunities.

The ILO's definition emphasises 'intentional' ecosystem development. Here is what this means for Entrepreneurial CoVEs:

- **Beyond Curriculum:** Implementers within a CoVE do not just deliver courses. They actively seek to improve the surrounding ecosystem. This might involve connecting students with mentors, fostering partnerships, or organising events promoting entrepreneurship.
- **Student-centred Approach:** CoVEs can encourage intentional change-making within their student body, by fostering an entrepreneurial mindset among all students, not just those seeking to launch start-ups.

Examples

A CoVE partners with a local NGO to offer a training programme and micro-loans for underprivileged youth interested in starting micro-enterprises.

- The faculty develops a capstone course where students work with local businesses to solve real-world challenges.
- A CoVE establishes a makerspace, providing students access to tools and technology for prototyping and innovation. The CoVE actively connects students with industry mentors and internship opportunities. To summarise, identifying the potential thinkers, informers/advisors, funders, and implementers lays the foundation for strategic relationship building. To further refine their approach, CoVEs can now analyse each stakeholder's level of influence and power within the ecosystem, providing insights for prioritizing engagement strategies and cultivating mutually beneficial partnerships that will propel their mission forward.

3.2 Empathy Mapping

Empathy maps help CoVEs shift from an internal focus to focusing on the needs and perspectives of their stakeholders. This allows identifying the pain points and aspirations of their stakeholders, enabling them to tailor their approach, build stronger relationships, and foster more meaningful collaboration.

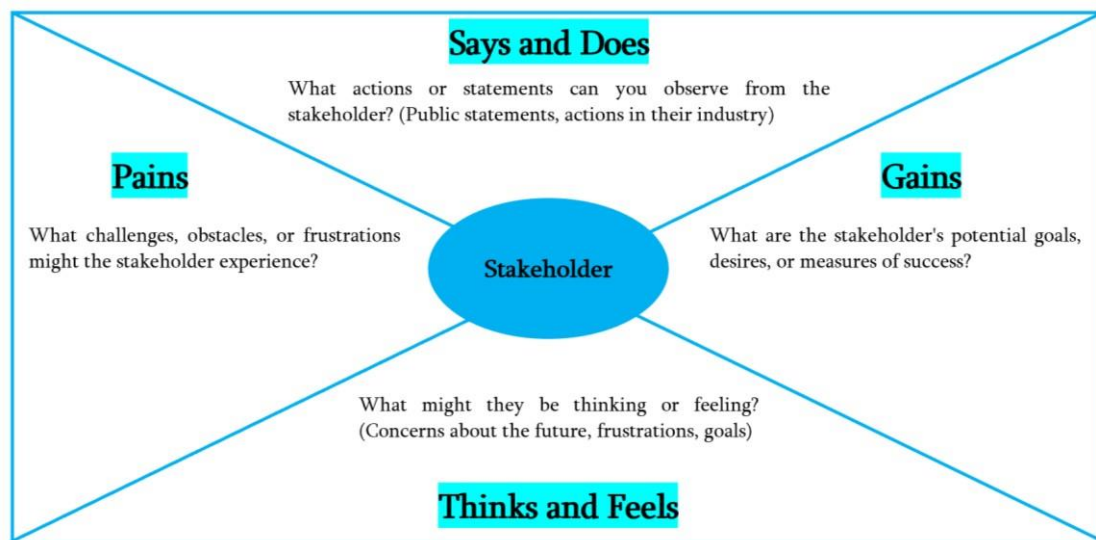
CoVEs can start by gathering information about stakeholder pain points and goals through research, such as reviewing annual reports, marketing materials, online forums or customer interest groups.

However, the most valuable insights come from direct engagement with stakeholders through interviews, surveys, or informal conversations.

Empathy Map Structure

A typical Empathy Map has the following four quadrants, with the stakeholder at the centre:

Diagram 3. Empathy Map



'Says and Does'

The 'Says & Does' section of an Empathy Map serves as a window into an organisation's actions and public statements. It observes their resource allocation patterns, the partnerships they form, and the causes they champion. While less subjective than the 'Thinks & Feels' quadrant, this section is crucial for CoVEs. It reveals the organisation's priorities as demonstrated through concrete choices, not just rhetoric.

CoVEs can strategically use this information in several ways. It can help them identify potential areas of alignment, where their own mission overlaps with the stakeholder's demonstrated behaviour. This allows for tailored outreach that emphasizes shared goals. The 'Says & Does' analysis can also prevent mismatched partnerships by uncovering inconsistencies between an organisation's public image and their true actions.

Here are examples of the questions CoVEs can ask to fill the 'Says & Does' quadrant:

- Where does the organisation invest most of its time, funds, or staff?
- What events do they participate in, and which causes do they visibly support?
- Who are their frequent collaborators, and what does this reveal about their priorities?
- How do they communicate with their stakeholders (formal reports vs. social media, etc.)?
- What new projects or programmes have they launched, and what does this signal about their current focus?

'Thinks and Feels'

Understanding an organisation's underlying motivations, concerns, and aspirations is crucial for building impactful partnerships. While the 'Says & Does' quadrant of the Empathy Map reveals

actions, the 'Thinks & Feels' section offers insights into the 'why' behind their decisions. CoVEs can use this knowledge to:

- **Tailor Communication:** instead of generic messaging, demonstrate an understanding of the organisation's unique pressures or long-term goals.
- **Anticipate Objections:** identify potential internal concerns that they might have about partnering with a CoVE, allowing for proactive reassurance.
- **Build Deeper Trust:** by demonstrating empathy and a desire to support the organisation's vision (beyond just their own objectives), CoVEs foster genuine relationships, not just transactions.

Example of questions to consider uncovering 'Thinks and Feels':

- What pressures might this organisation be facing, both internally and within their industry as a whole?
- Does this organisation's leadership seem driven by short-term goals, or a long-term vision for their sector?
- Are there any unspoken anxieties within this organisation? • What is this organisation's culture?

Building impactful partnerships requires CoVEs to dive beyond superficial observations and truly understand the external challenges and internal motivations that drive stakeholder organisations. To achieve this, CoVEs should leverage their social networks to gather insider knowledge, uncovering the organisation's culture and self-perception. This goes beyond publicly available information, providing valuable insights for crafting effective engagement strategies.

'Pains'

The 'Pains' quadrant focuses on specific challenges, frustrations, and roadblocks a stakeholder organisation faces. These are practical, often quantifiable obstacles that hinder their ability to achieve goals. For example:

- Poor service provided to customers.
- Demotivated employees due to toxic work culture.
- Outdated technology causing inefficiencies in their core operations.
- Difficulty finding employees with the right skill sets.

Understanding a stakeholder's pain points allows the CoVE to demonstrate potential solutions. However, not all pains are equal. Analysing their severity and frequency helps CoVEs prioritise which issues they can most effectively address, by maximising the potential for a successful partnership.

How 'Pains' Differ from 'Thinks & Feels'

'Pains' are external problems, while the 'Thinks & Feels' quadrant revolves around the stakeholder's inner anxieties, motivations, and goals. Sometimes, a stated 'pain' is just a symptom. Understanding the 'why' behind the pain (which 'Thinks & Feels' helps with) can lead the CoVE to suggest to the stakeholder more impactful, long-term solutions.

Example of questions to ask to uncover 'Pains'

- What are the main bottlenecks in providing great service to the customer?
- What are their customers complaining about?
- What are their employees complaining about?

Valuable insights about stakeholder perceptions can often be collected from public sources such as customer reviews, interest groups, and online forums. However, to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding, engaging with insiders who have first-hand knowledge of the stakeholder landscape is highly recommended.

'Gains'

The 'Gains' quadrant focuses on a stakeholder organisation's goals, aspirations, and what they define as success. This includes measurable outcomes (revenue, jobs created, expansion), reputation and recognition (awards, positive PR), and intangible successes (stronger community, social impact).

Understanding a stakeholder organisation's desired outcomes goes far beyond the surface level. If a CoVE can demonstrate a direct connection between their offerings and those specific goals, their partnership proposal becomes very compelling. This alignment shows a deep understanding of what motivates the stakeholder and increases the likelihood of a strong, collaborative dynamic.

Additionally, some of the organisation's deepest aspirations might not be openly advertised. Perhaps they long for industry-wide recognition, or dream of a specific social impact. When a CoVE understands these unstated gains, their communication can resonate on an emotional level that goes beyond the transactional. They position themselves as not just a service provider, but a partner who deeply believes in the organisation's potential.

These are examples of questions to ask to uncover stakeholder gains:

- What is the strategic direction of an organisation? Where does the organisation envision itself in 5/10 years? Have they articulated this in a vision statement or strategic plan?
- Which other organisations (within or outside their industry) do they admire and why?
- What awards or recognition would create genuine excitement within the organisation, and why would they matter?
- What are the social impact goals or community initiatives that they feel passionate about, even if these are less directly tied to their core business model?

Information Gathering Techniques

A well-crafted Empathy Map helps CoVEs get into the mindset of a stakeholder organisation, it is important to remember that initial assumptions need to be tested against reality. Interviews and surveys, observations, analysing strategic plans, annual reports or other secondary research such as monitoring social media, industry publications, etc. can provide insights about an organisation's 'thinks and feels'. However, if the CoVE has a strong relationship with anyone connected to the stakeholder organisation (without a conflict of interest), these individuals may be able to provide information about the organisational culture and leadership motivations.

Common pitfalls during empathy mapping

The piloting of empathy mapping exercise among six CoVEs revealed the Common Pitfalls During Stakeholder Needs and Wants Identification

- **Over-reliance on Official PR/Marketing Information:** for a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder pain points and delighters, and to identify pathways for common value creation, it is crucial to research both public and insider information. However, some schools underestimate the importance of insider insights, relying solely on official PR/marketing materials. This approach provides an incomplete picture, limiting the potential for effective stakeholder engagement.
- **Difficulty in Obtaining Internal Stakeholder Information:** some CoVEs felt hesitant and lacked the know-how to research internal stakeholder pain points. The stakeholder social network mapping exercise is a valuable tool to address this, as it empowers CoVEs to identify internal connections within organisations, facilitating immediate and future collaborations. This exercise also encourages all employees to contribute to strategic relationship building, resulting in improved morale and stronger connections.
- **Lack of Engagement from Key Decision-Makers and Stakeholder Representatives:** in many cases, the absence of active participation from directors and individuals directly involved in stakeholder engagement led to superficial analysis and limited actionable outcomes from the Empathy Mapping Exercise. It is crucial that relevant personnel lead this process, while others can be consulted for

additional insights. Reversing this approach hinders effective stakeholder understanding and engagement.

3.3 Stakeholder Social Network Map

Many organisations struggle to understand stakeholders' true pain points and organisational culture, impacting their value propositions and negotiations with stakeholders. Despite this, many rely on publicly available PR materials rather than seeking insights from insider sources.

Stakeholder Social Network Mapping can help bridge this gap by revealing hidden connections and relationships within the stakeholder organisation. This can lead to identifying key influencers who can provide valuable insights into the organisation's culture and unspoken concerns, thus enhancing the development of collaboration ideas and negotiation strategies.

Internal Social Network Mapping is a strategic tool for CoVEs to visualise and leverage existing relationships within their organisation to enhance stakeholder engagement. By identifying employees who have connections with individuals in key stakeholder organisations, CoVEs can streamline communication, facilitate information flow, and cultivate stronger partnerships. This approach empowers employees to actively participate in strategic relationship building, boosting morale and strengthening connections both within the organisation and with external partners. Developing Stakeholder Social Networking Map consists of three steps, namely, gathering information, visualizing the network, and leveraging the connections.

Step 1: Gathering Connection Information

Start by collecting information about your employees' connections with external stakeholders. Organise the information on a table with data divided by (1) Employee Position; (2) Department; (3) Stakeholder Organisation; (4) Contact Name; (5) Contact Position; (6) Decision Maker (Yes/No); (7) Type of Relationship; (8) Strength of Relationship (1-5); and (9) Potential Areas of Collaboration.

To successfully engage employees in sharing their contact information, it is crucial to clearly communicate the purpose and value of the Stakeholder Social Networking Map, highlighting the potential benefits for both the company and individual employees. Simplifying the data collection process through user-friendly forms or templates can also encourage participation. Additionally, offering rewards or recognition for those who actively contribute can further incentivise employees to share their valuable connections and contribute to the overall success of the initiative.

Step 2: Visualise the Network

Once you have gathered the information, create a visual map of the connections. You can do this manually using a whiteboard or chart paper, or you can use digital tools, such as Social Network Mapping Tools⁷.

Step 3: Leverage the Connections

Use the social network map to identify potential champions for stakeholder engagement. These are employees with strong relationships in stakeholder organisations who can act as bridges, facilitating communication and collaboration. Empower employees to contribute to strategic relationship building by sharing the map and encouraging them to leverage their connections. This can lead to increased morale, stronger internal connections, and more fruitful external partnerships.

By uncovering and utilising these hidden connections, CoVEs can unlock new opportunities for collaboration and create a more engaged and connected workforce.

⁷ Examples of free tools include: (1) Kumu: <https://kumu.io/>, Free for basic use, offers a user-friendly interface for creating and sharing interactive network maps. (2) Gephi: <https://gephi.org/>, Open-source software with advanced features for analysing and visualising complex networks.

4. PHASE 3 – BUILDING SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS

This phase focuses on transforming the understanding gained in Phase 2 into actionable strategies for engagement and collaboration. By utilising targeted tools and frameworks, CoVEs can build lasting partnerships that create mutual value and drive their mission forward.

We will explore the following instruments in detail:

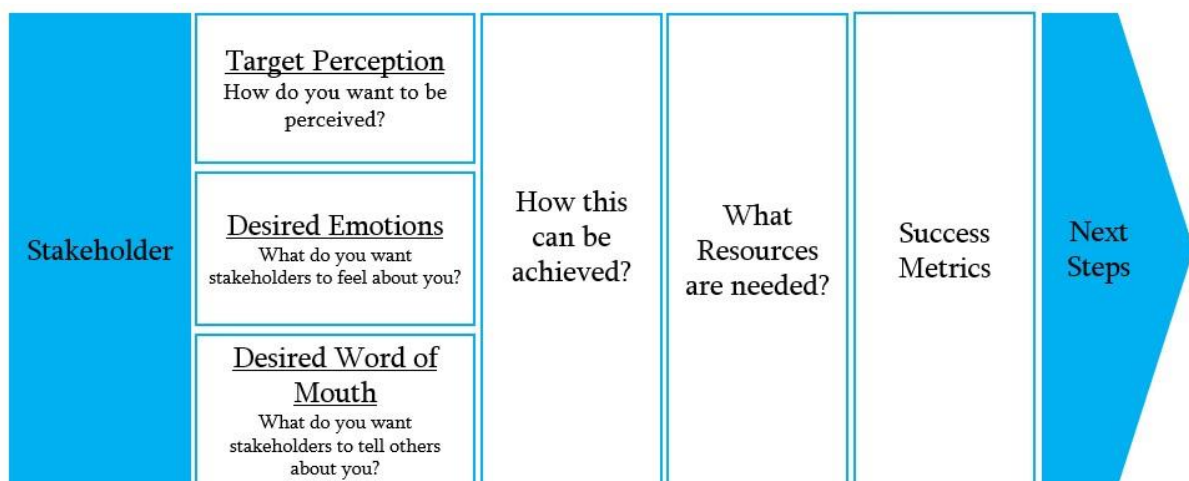
1. **Stakeholder Perception Roadmap:** a strategic tool for tailoring communication and activities to resonate deeply with specific stakeholders.
2. **Value Proposition Framework:** a structured approach to crafting compelling value propositions that highlight the unique benefits and advantages that is easily understandable to stakeholder groups.
3. **Idea Evaluation Matrix:** a framework for assessing the alignment of CoVE initiatives with the interests and priorities of various stakeholders, ensuring that collaborative efforts are mutually beneficial and impactful.

4.1 Stakeholder Perception Roadmap

Stakeholder Perception Roadmap combines a clear focus on the desired perception with action-oriented steps. This framework helps CoVEs strategically tailor their positioning towards a specific stakeholder, ensuring that the messaging resonates closely with that organisation's needs and priorities. It guides CoVEs beyond just crafting ideal statements, pushing them to develop concrete plans for influencing the stakeholder's perception and the way they communicate about the CoVE to others within their network.

The diagram below outlines how CoVEs can craft their desired stakeholder perception.

Diagram 4. Stakeholder Perception Roadmap



Target Perception: once the CoVE has selected a stakeholder, thoroughly researched their pain points and aspirations, it is time to establish a strategic perception goal. The common pitfall here is to aim for generic positive perceptions, which leads to vague communication and neutral stakeholder attitudes. Instead, CoVEs should focus on specific, actionable goals that resonate with the target audience. For example, a school aiming to be perceived as a pathway out of poverty can tailor its messaging and activities to demonstrate this goal, leading to stronger connections with potential students who share this aspiration. The following activity idea is an example of how this perception goal can be achieved.

Showcasing success stories: the school could create a series of short videos or social media posts featuring alumni who have successfully overcome socio-economic challenges through the programme and landed well-paying jobs. These stories would serve as relatable and inspiring examples for potential students.

To showcase success stories, CoVEs must allocate project resources, establish success indicators, and outline immediate steps for implementation.

Desired Emotions: similar to perception goals, it is crucial for CoVEs to identify specific emotions that they want to evoke in stakeholders, rather than simply aiming for general positivity. Drawing from Plutchik's psychoevolutionary theory of emotions⁸, CoVEs can strategically target emotions that align with their perception goals and resonate with the target audience. For instance, a school aiming to be perceived as a pathway out of poverty might seek to evoke emotions such as:

- **Trust:** building trust in the school's ability to deliver on its promises.
- **Anticipation:** creating excitement and anticipation for the opportunities that the programme can unlock.
- **Joy:** fostering a sense of joy and optimism about the future.

Regardless of industry or stakeholder type, fostering feelings of love and optimism is universally beneficial. These emotions create a positive foundation for collaboration, engagement, and loyalty.

On Plutchik's wheel of emotions⁹, love is indeed a combination of trust and joy. However, to evoke optimism, we need to combine joy and anticipation. This combination creates a sense of excitement and positive expectation for the future, which is the essence of optimism.

For example, to promote anticipation, CoVEs can introduce elements of surprise and reward through contests, challenges, or interactive experiences related to the CoVE's offerings. Joy can be fostered by sharing heart-warming stories of transformation, growth, and community impact facilitated by the CoVE's programmes. Use testimonials, case studies, and personal anecdotes to create emotional connections can all be used. Trust can be evoked through transparency and open communication about the CoVE's challenges.

By understanding the nuances of different emotions and how they relate to their target audience's values and aspirations, CoVEs can craft communication strategies that effectively evoke the desired emotional responses, leading to stronger engagement and support.

Once these ideas are developed, for each project idea, resources must be allocated, success indicators and immediate steps for implementation must be outlined.

Desired Word-of-Mouth Strategy

The third and nonetheless important element of stakeholder perception roadmap is desired word-of-mouth strategy. Beyond specific perceptions and emotions, CoVEs should also strategically craft their desired word-of-mouth strategy. This involves identifying the key messages that they want stakeholders to share organically within their networks. Like other aspects of perception management, generic positive statements such as 'Great school!' are less effective than targeted, impactful phrases.

Identifying Key Messages

CoVEs should focus on crafting concise, memorable messages that highlight their unique value proposition and resonate with their target audience. For example, a school aiming to be perceived as a pathway out of poverty might want stakeholders to say:

- 'This school changed my life and opened doors I never thought possible.'
- 'They provide the skills and support needed to break the cycle of poverty.'

⁸ https://www.academia.edu/43620307/The_Nature_of_Emotions_Plutchik_2001

⁹ <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/putting-some-emotion-into-your-design-plutchik-s-wheel><https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/putting-some-emotion-into-your-design-plutchik-s-wheel-of-emotionsof-emotions>

- ‘The education I received here was practical, relevant, and led to a well-paying job.’

Promoting Organic Word of Mouth

By crafting a targeted Word of Mouth strategy and actively encouraging positive word-of-mouth, CoVEs can amplify their reach, build credibility, and attract new stakeholders who are more likely to be aligned with their values and mission.

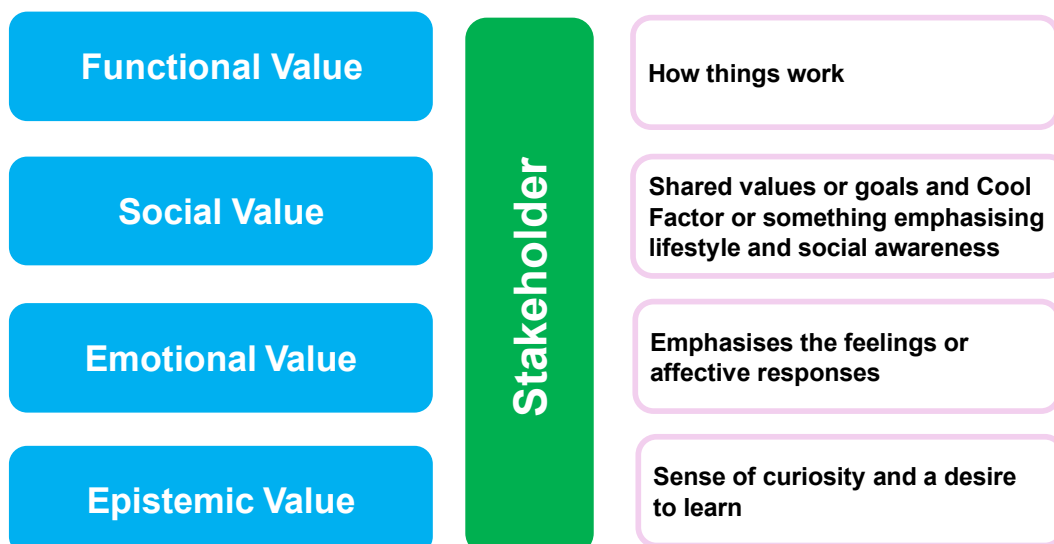
- **Exceptional experiences:** provide stakeholders with outstanding experiences throughout their interactions with the CoVE, from initial inquiries to programme completion and beyond. This could include personalised attention, responsive communication, and exceeding expectations in terms of service and support.
- **Shareable content:** create content that is inherently shareable, such as inspiring stories, impactful statistics, or easily digestible infographics. This could be disseminated through social media, email campaigns, or even printed materials.
- **Advocate recognition:** acknowledge and celebrate stakeholders who actively promote the CoVE within their networks. This could be through social media shoutouts, testimonials, or even small incentives such as gift cards or exclusive events.

4.2 Communicating CoVEs’ Value Proposition

A Value Proposition is the core promise a CoVE makes about the unique benefits it delivers to stakeholders. Understanding the different types of value is crucial for crafting compelling messaging.

This tool, inspired by the work of Sheth et al¹⁰, on consumption values, breaks down a CoVE's offerings into functional, emotional, social, and epistemic benefits. By identifying the values that resonate most with specific stakeholder groups, CoVEs can tailor their communication for maximum impact, by ensuring that their value proposition is clearly understood and deeply resonates with their audience.

Diagram 5. Value Proposition Framework



¹⁰ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240436339_Consumption_Values_and_Market_Choices_Theory_and_Applications

Value Proposition Framework is a powerful tool for CoVEs to hone their messaging. Here is an elaboration of each value type, along with specific examples of how they translate to a CoVE's offerings.

Functional Value

The practical, tangible benefits of a stakeholder derive from the CoVE's offerings. The focus should be on problem-solving, efficiency, and measurable outcomes.

CoVE Examples

- **Curriculum:** up to date with industry trends, skills-focused, adaptable to real-world needs.
- **Faculty Expertise:** specific knowledge that fills gaps for industry partners.
- **Facilities & Equipment:** access to specialised technology students would not have otherwise.
- **Cost-Effectiveness:** programmes priced competitively, or scholarship opportunities.

Emotional Value

The positive feelings, sense of belonging, or deeper aspirations that the CoVE fosters for stakeholders.

CoVE Examples

- **Student Experience:** a feeling of excitement about the future, a sense of possibility, being part of an innovative community.
- **Industry Partners:** confidence that they are hiring graduates prepared for real-world challenges, or the satisfaction of mentoring the next generation.
- **Alumni:** pride in their alma mater, feeling connected to ongoing progress in their field.

Social Value

How the CoVE enhances a stakeholder's status, group identity, or facilitates connections.

CoVE Examples

- **Students:** being part of a cohort known for its entrepreneurial mindset, networking opportunities that open doors.
- **Industry:** partnering with the CoVE can enhance a company's reputation as innovative or socially responsible.
- **Government:** the CoVE can be seen as a driver of economic development, attracting talent to the region.

Epistemic Value

Additional channels and sources for satisfying curiosity, and the desire for knowledge of CoVEs

Examples:

- **Faculty Research:** access to new insights not yet widely available within the industry.
- **Student Projects:** fresh perspectives and unconventional approaches to solving problems. Events: exposure to thought leaders, exploring emerging trends for shaping the future.

This framework empowers CoVEs to analyse their programmes, events, and partnerships through the lens of stakeholder needs. By prioritising the functional, emotional, social, and epistemic value offered, CoVEs ensure that their communication is targeted, persuasive, and demonstrates a deep understanding of their unique selling points.

4.3 Idea Evaluation Matrix

The Idea Evaluation Matrix is a strategic tool for empowering CoVEs to assess potential initiatives, while ensuring alignment with stakeholder needs and organisational objectives. By evaluating each idea's impact on both stakeholders and the CoVE, the matrix facilitates the confident selection of initiatives that maximise mutual benefits. Furthermore, the matrix evaluates the clarity of the value proposition of each idea, to ensure that chosen initiatives not only address stakeholder needs but also directly contribute to achieving the CoVE's strategic objectives.

Stakeholder 1	Collaboration idea	Stakeholder pain point being addressed	Why will it work?	What are the benefits for stakeholders?	What do we get from this?
Idea 1					
Idea 2					

In conclusion, the Idea Evaluation Matrix, with its emphasis on addressing stakeholders' pain points and mutual interest, empowers CoVEs to make informed, strategic decisions.

5. SUMMARY

Strategic stakeholder engagement is crucial for CoVEs to establish themselves as indispensable players in their ecosystems. The Ecosystem Engagement Toolkit is designed to help Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) build sustainable partnerships and become more entrepreneurial through a three-phase approach: internal assessment, stakeholder mapping and prioritisation, and building partnerships. The Internal Assessment phase involves using tools such as a SWOT Analysis, Partnership Needs Analysis, and Net Promoter Score (NPS) Assessment to evaluate internal strengths, weaknesses, and potential partnership opportunities. The Stakeholder Mapping & Prioritisation phase focuses on identifying and empathising with key stakeholders through Stakeholder Mapping, Stakeholder Social Networking Map, and Empathy Mapping to categorise and understand stakeholder motivations, challenges, and aspirations. Lastly, the Building of Sustainable Partnerships phase involves creating Stakeholder Perception Roadmaps, Value Proposition Frameworks, and Idea Evaluation Matrices to align CoVE initiatives with stakeholder needs and build lasting partnerships.

This strategic approach positions CoVEs as dynamic, responsive institutions capable of driving meaningful change in vocational education and beyond.

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