

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN MODEL OF EXCELLENCE IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRES IN THE REGION OF CASTILLA Y LEÓN (SPAIN)

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INTRODUCTION

Striving to do things better is not an option but an obligation for those involved in the vocational training system. The public authorities responsible for vocational training centres have an obligation to promote continuous improvement, guiding and helping them advance toward excellence.

In October 2019, the European Commission published a map of vocational training centres distinguished by their excellence in Europe¹. This document indicates that there are two types of "Centres of Professional Excellence" (CoVE) that can be identified:

- "1. CoVEs that are expressly created to promote excellence in vocational training (e.g., Tknika in the Basque Country).
2. Individual providers of vocational training that function as CoVEs in a region, subregion, or productive sector ("In Spain, 150 VET schools across the country form a network of integrated training centres; p. 14").

This distinction attracted our interest, since Castilla y León is the region of Spain with the largest number of Integrated Vocational Training Centres (with 37 centres). Integrated centres provide both initial vocational training for young people and continuing training for workers. They also collaborate with companies to develop collaborative projects and carry out internationalization projects.

A few months later, the European Training Foundation (ETF) published a document that attempts to address the complexity of professional excellence and explain the different types of centres (CoVE) that embody excellence in vocational training, their missions and functions, and identify good practices in different contexts². According to this document, **"the international community does not have a common definition of centres of VET**

¹ Mapping of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). Publications Office of the European Union <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/566920f4-ee2d-11e9-a32c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

² Centres of Vocational Excellence, an engine for vocational education and training development – An international ETF study (2020). <https://south.euneighbours.eu/publication/centres-vocational-excellence-engine-vocational-education-and/>

excellence. However, based on analysis of international practices, the term CoVE mostly refers to networks of VET partnership-based institutions, which are established in different regions but reflect the national policy priorities of a given country” (ETF, 2019a).

This lack of definition led us to explore the concept of excellence in greater depth, before initiating a strategy to guide the vocational training centres of Castilla y León towards excellence. This was the first step on the long road to excellence in our vocational training system.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE EXCELLENT?

In Castilla and León, although vocational training centres are created to perform a core or basic function (training professionals), over time many of them have often transformed into multi-function centres. That is, they have evolved, going from being centres with a single function (teaching in the classroom) to multifunctional centres, expanding their service range and their relationships with other actors in the skill ecosystem at local level.

Advocates of maintaining a single function or mission believe that excellence is only possible through focus, as otherwise, cultures and missions become blurred, and resources are diverted from the core function to serve others.

Proponents of multi-function centres point out that organizations must respond to the changing needs of society and that developing multiple functions allows for the exploitation of complementarities and synergies. This multifunctional concept has gained ground in European countries, as it allows training centres to be aligned with the needs of the production system. Training centres become providers of skills for the production system, and their constant contact with companies allows them to adapt the teaching and learning process to changes occurring within companies. In this service provision model, the concept of professional excellence implies a holistic, student-centred approach in which vocational training is part of skill ecosystems, contributing to regional development, innovation, and smart specialization strategies. It involves integrating vocational training into the knowledge triangle, along with research and innovation, working in close collaboration with other sectors.



Figure 1. Triangle of knowledge

Thus, **excellence is the result of the interactions** that occur between the vocational training centre and the rest of the elements that make up the skills ecosystem. Excellence involves developing a Vocational A vocational training centre cannot be excellent if it does not permanently interact with its economic and social environment. An excellent training system allows students to acquire professional skills through high-quality training, and also creating innovative forms of collaboration with the world of work, continuous professional development of teaching staff, teaching methods, and mobility and internationalization strategies.

Fostering local/regional “Skills ecosystems”

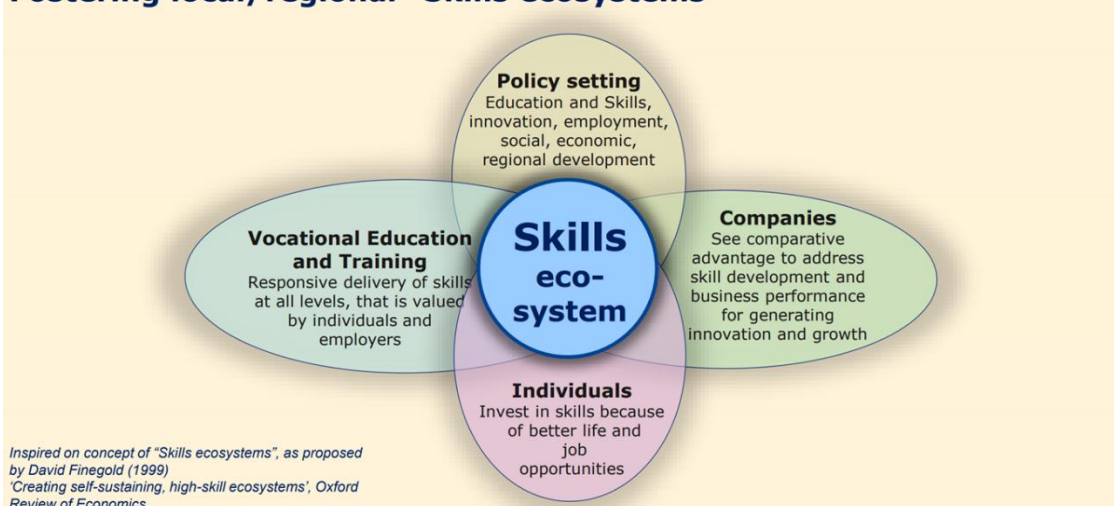


Figure 2. Fostering local/regional “Skills ecosystems”

WHAT DEFINES A CENTRE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (CoVE) AS EXCELLENT?

According with ETF, CoVEs are network organisations, emphasising cooperation with other actors and its role on regional socio-economic development-. CoVEs might be VET Providers, Groups of VET Providers and/or organisations that coordinate other VET Providers, that in collaboration with public and private players/ stakeholders help to create regional/local ‘skills ecosystems’. CoVEs are not a one-size-fits-all model, but rather a **flexible and adaptable concept** that can be tailored to the specific needs, priorities and resources of each country and sector(s). Overall, CoVEs ensure quality and relevance of VET skills, as well as foster regional development and innovation. CoVEs are a promising and innovative approach for VET. However, they also entail significant efforts and responsibilities for the VET providers and their partners. CoVEs are not a quick fix or a simple solution, but a long-term and strategic investment that requires building capacities on VET communities towards Excellence; strong political will (a clear policy framework), and a collaborative culture among all the relevant actors in the Skills Ecosystem.

According to the European Commission, CoVEs bring together a wide range of local partners, such as VET providers, employers, research centres, development agencies and employment services (among others) **to develop ‘skills ecosystems’** that contribute to

regional, economic and social development, innovation and smart specialisation strategies”.

Skill ecosystems are defined as “regional or sectoral social formations in which human capability is developed and deployed for productive purposes” The ‘label’ was introduced by Finegold in 1999. Finegold researched “the dense concentrations of biomedical and computer hardware and software firms clustered in Northern and Southern California”, which had become “self-sustaining high-skill ecosystems” (Finegold, D. 1999, p. 61). “Their basic elements are business settings and associated business models, institutional/ policy frameworks, modes of engaging labour, the structure of jobs, as well as the level of skills and systems for their formation.” (Buchanan et al. 2001).

However, the concept of a skills ecosystem has also evolved overtime, but essentially it demonstrates that skills supply relates to a complex set of intertwined issues at national or regional level, including the structure of labour markets, the attractiveness of certain kinds of work, patterns of recruitment and selection, and poor deployment of labour.

In the skills ecosystems, the context is not neutral or selfevident as is implied by the ‘ecosystem’ metaphor taken from the life sciences. Analysis and reform in skills analysis needs to acknowledge that most problems arise from the ways that skills in demand are defined, used and developed and have their roots in the nature of work concerned.

The new model of skill ecosystems highlights the importance of skills that generate benefits and the utilisation of the skills that the workers possess. Skills utilisation cannot be tackled independently from industrial policies and business development. In other words, skill supply cannot be considered or addressed separately from demand. This includes not only an assessment of current and future demand, and socio-economic and labour market conditions, but also in the context of actions required to stimulate demand or absorptive capacity.

Recent experience with skill ecosystem reform has highlighted that the matter of interest is probably more accurately understood as ‘skill settlements’ between various actors and their interest. What are the defining features of the settlement of interest? Who are the key parties? What is its character in terms of high-, intermediate-, and low-skill work?

Rather, the reforms have hit considerable tacit resistance as they have run up against key features of the current skill settlements in particular sectors and regions settlements with which many employers and governments are comfortable.

Taking into account the previous research in this sense, the framing of skills ecosystems that we use in Castilla y León explores the skills needed for new transitions, conceptualising the role of skills within the ecosystem as an enabling factor between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the skills ecosystem in a common context of the European regions, as we show in Figure 3.

processes. The relationships between these agents and the policy settings is essential to develop coordinated actions.

- Between enablers and companies, the enablers can help companies to identify skill needs and mismatch and contribute to the implementation of actions based on co-responsibility and partnership.
- Between companies and policy setting, the interactions between companies and policy setting help to develop action frameworks aimed at meeting the needs of talent in the productive system.
- Between enablers and skill providers, the interactions between skills providers and enablers contribute to facilitating the relationship between skills providers and companies, as well as to the development of joint actions in the field of vocational guidance and entrepreneurship.

At the top of the skill ecosystem models we can place “environmental factors” that determine the behaviour of the system. These factors act as drivers of change. They affect the behaviour of each one of the components of the ecosystem in the horizontal plane. The new transitions of the productive system, the new roles that enablers must adopt, the reforms that training systems and skills providers must address, and the new frameworks for action are determined by the policies established at national, European, or global levels. and the new opportunities that arise to adapt to the changes, such as those offered by new technologies and other drivers.

At the bottom of the skill ecosystem model are the benefits that the system must achieve so that its dynamics and evolution ensure its permanence and growth. As natural ecosystems, changes caused by environmental factors can pose a threat to the ecosystem. For this reason, it is essential that the changes make it possible to obtain benefits in terms of ecosystem sustainability. In this case, not only environmental sustainability, but also economic and social sustainability. The skill ecosystem is constantly evolving, constantly revolving around its vertical axis, interacting with other skill ecosystems of related productive subsectors.

We might now ask how the skills strategies, could be incorporated into this ecosystem model. For instance, in figure 9 we can see where Skills First Strategy (World Economic Forum) could be incorporated. Basically, the strategy constitutes a framework of action that guides the interactions on the horizontal plane between the interest groups of the ecosystem. Enablers 1 and 2 of the Skills First strategy would act as political and mediation elements (45° interactions) standing as drivers in the upper part of the model.

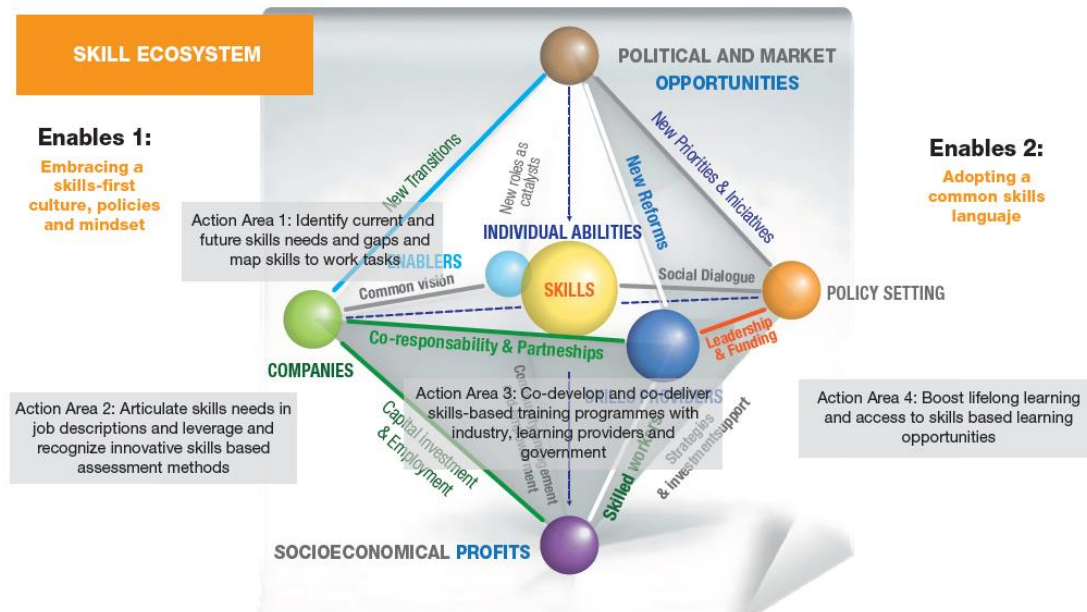


Figure 4. Skills First” strategy in the Skills Ecosystem.

The vocational training centres of the vocational education and training system of Castilla and León act as providers of skills. However, they are not the only providers of skills in the training system, as other non-governmental actors also intervene.

The European Commission has also identified the **typical activities of a CoVE**, grouping them into three clusters: Governance and Funding, Teaching and Learning, and Cooperation and Partnership.

Typical activities of CoVE's

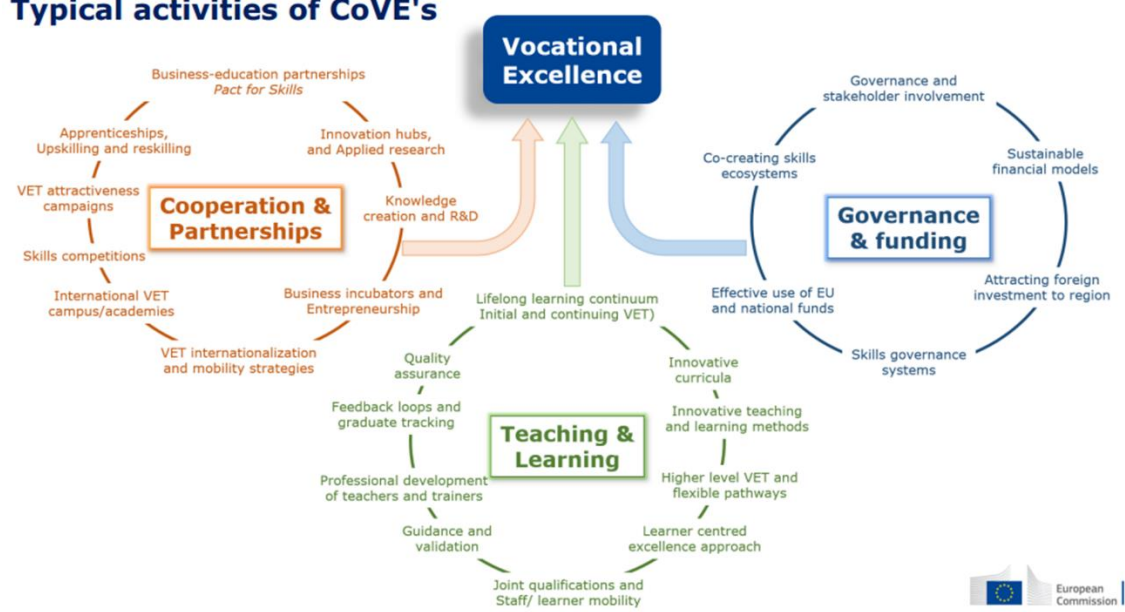


Figure 5. Typical activities of CoVEs

Having a model for centres of excellence is essential to establishing the roadmap. The model proposed by the European Commission is based on the integration of skills providers into the skills ecosystem. Improving the typical activities of a CoVE contributes to improving the dynamics of the skills ecosystem, It also allows for the evaluation of the improvement of the system as a whole. However, not all activities can be carried out perfectly at the same time, and training centres cannot carry out many of them independently.

This leads us to affirm that:

1. Excellence is not a status, but it is a way of working to achieve continuous improvement.
2. Being a centre of vocational excellence should not be a privilege of a few. All vocational training centres must move towards excellence.
3. It is not possible to be excellent at everything.
4. To understand the situation in which a training centre finds itself, it is necessary to first define the model of centre that we consider excellent and its role in the skills ecosystem.
5. To advance toward excellence, training centres must be able to analyze their starting situation and monitor their progress. To do so, they need to self-assess using a well-designed tool.

Besides, many of the activities they must carry out require **support from the administration and guidelines**. If we want vocational training centres to work together toward excellence, we must design a strategy to support and facilitate their journey and different levels of governance to make it possible to carry out.

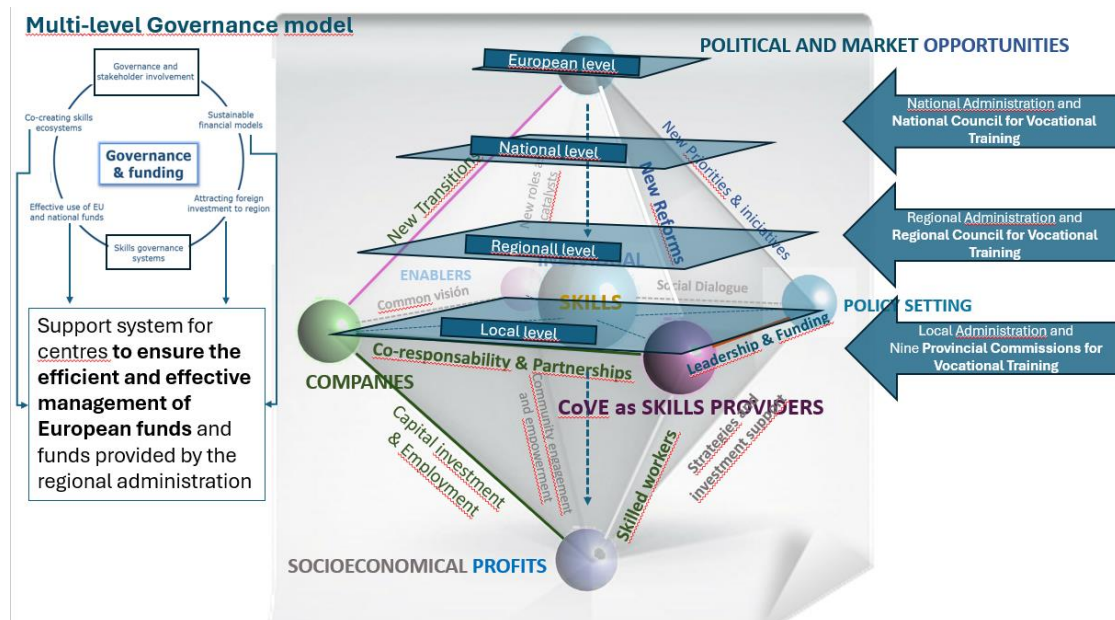


Figure 6. Support system for CoVEs

In the area of **teaching and learning**, the support of the government of Castilla and León has focused on the aspects indicated (Figure 7). The regional government has supported:

- An integrated initial and continuing training system based on a unique modular catalogue associated with a catalogue of professional competence standards.
- Continuous review of content and new offers adapted to the new needs of the production system.
- Active learning methodologies Classrooms with virtual and augmented reality.
- Specialization courses and flexibility (modular offers and blended and virtual learning).
- Procedure of Recognition of excellence (Beginner, intermediate and advance level) and extraordinary prizes to the students.
- Mobility Consortium for teachers and learners (Erasmus+). From COVID 19 pandemic, 1500 mobilities of learners and 800 of teacher in 400 cities of different countries in Europe.
- Procedure for recognition and accreditation of skills acquired through work experience Around 2,500 people accredit their experience annually.
- A specific teacher training anual plan.
- An annual study of graduates' job placement; 87.4% find employment upon completion of their studies in 2024.
- The implementation of quality assurance system (ISO 9001 in all centres and ISO 14000, EFQM...in some of them)

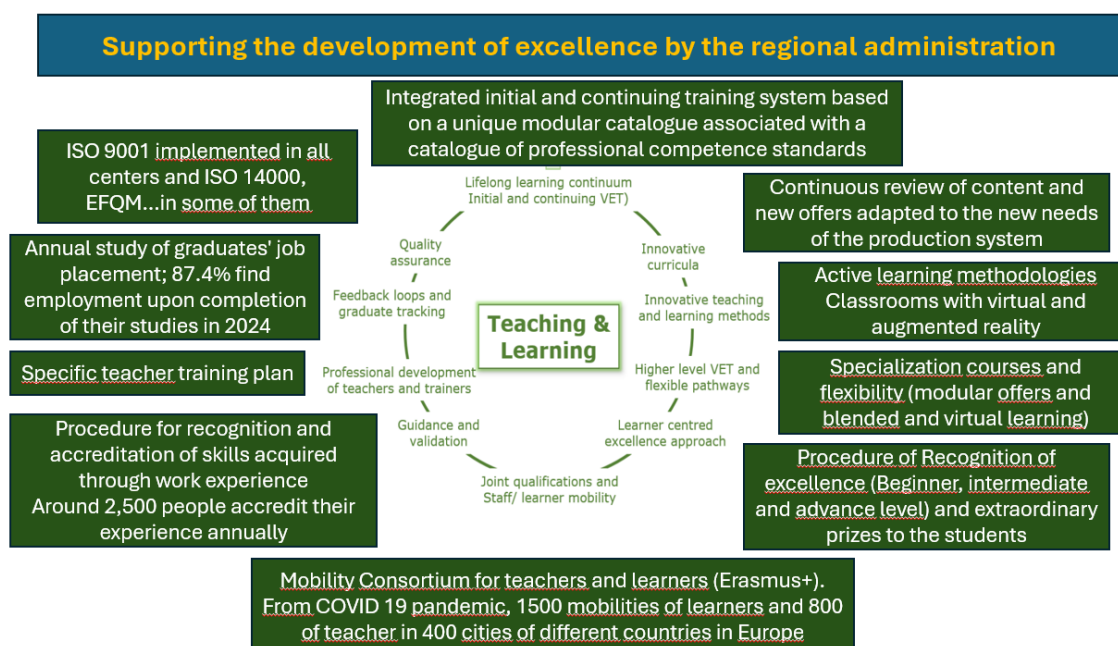


Figure 7. Supporting the development of excellence by the regional administration:
Teaching & Learning

Finally, in the area of cooperation and partnership, the regional government has supported the development of the following actions (Fig. 8):

- We have created Innovation hub in the Habitat Sector and Care Sector working with universities, technology centres and clusters.
- The regional government funds applied innovation projects developed by centres and companies. More than 400 projects have been funded in the last four years.
- We have created entrepreneurship classrooms in all public centres. Some of them already have business incubators.
- Regional Mobility Consortium with 128 Vocational Centres of Castilla y León for the management of student mobility within the framework of Erasmus+.
- Regional Skills Competition and National Skills Competition selecting student to participate in Euroskills and WorldSkills.
- Campaigns on social media, press, radio and televisión.
- Dual training system in two modalities: general (25-35% in-company training) and intensive (50-75% in-company training).
- Reskilling and upskilling offers for workers.



Figure 8. Supporting the development of excellence by the regional administration: Cooperation and Partnership

WHAT BENEFITS DOES THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING SYSTEM OBTAIN BY IMPLEMENTING THE EUROPEAN MODEL OF EXCELLENCE IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRES?

According to the European Commission, the CoVE model provides:

- **Strong and enduring partnerships;** VET providers (including VET at tertiary level), higher education institutions, and businesses, in which interactions are reciprocal and mutually beneficial.
- **Anchored into frameworks of regional development, innovation and smart specialisation;** Allows for the identification of synergies between policies and amongst stakeholders.

- **Integration of activities;** CoVEs achieve more than sum of the parts.

According with ETF, become CoVE is a step-by-step process :

1. Improving standards of normal business
2. Improving strategic development of thematic areas/functions
3. Mature level on which CoVEs are key to co-create skills ecosystems

The implementation of CoVE entails:

- **Vocational learners (and citizens) at heart:** VET learning processes and outcomes. Leap forward in innovative teaching and learning methods.
- **Bottom-up approach -whilst balancing top-down:** VET providers proactive role (practitioners as actors for change) to inform policy cycle.
- **VET providers/practitioners' action** to inform renewed partnerships approaches to shape skills and innovation ecosystems.
- **Updating capacities and opportunities for advancing VET internationalization.**
- **Holistic approach:** thematic dimensions linked to innovative T&L, GOV&FIN, COP&PART (Networking).

The beneficts for employees:

- **Access to Excellent Skilled Workforce** (Customers)
- (Decent) **Apprenticeships Schemes:** learners and employers build together renewed business culture.
- **Curriculum fit to industry** and Teacher's know-how.
- **Technology & Innovation** Transfer processes.
- **Image & Excellence recognition:** improving companies marketing strategies (fund-raising lines).

WHAT BENEFITS DOES A VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRE OBTAIN BY IMPLEMENTING THE EUROPEAN CENTRE OF PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE MODEL?

In Spain, with the exception of the so-called Integrated Vocational Training Centres, since 1990 most centres that provide vocational training are also centres that teach other secondary education courses.

In general, these are single-purpose centres, as they are primarily responsible for developing the courses assigned to them. Some of them have initiated improvement processes, incorporating student and professional mobility within the framework of the European Erasmus+ Programme or other pedagogical innovation actions.

Students who undertake vocational training courses undergo a training period in companies near the educational centre, but there is no participation of the companies in the design of the training process.

When a training centre adopts the European model of excellence, it assumes other functions and becomes a multifunctional centre whose main mission is to provide the

productive system with the human resources it needs, equipped with the necessary skills for the system to maintain or improve its productivity and competitiveness. The centre is integrated into the skills ecosystem and its actions are aligned with the interests and needs of the system's components. This integration allows for a fluid dialogue with the rest of the components of the skills ecosystem, facilitates the design of training programs, achieving better adaptation to the needs of companies and better alignment with the territory's smart specialization policies. These benefits not only improve the quality and relevance of vocational training centres. They also foster regional development and innovation, creating an ecosystem of skills where the educational and training centres respond actively to the real needs of the productive and social system.

Obviously, taking on new roles means a heavier workload and requires new financial and human resources.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE EUROPEAN MODEL OF EXCELLENCE IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRES?: THE STRATEGY

In 2020, the Department of Education of the Regional Government of Castile and León decided to adopt the European model of excellence and promote the implementation of this model in centres that provide vocational training in the region of Castile and León.

To achieve this, he considered it necessary to first overcome any possible resistance to change that the centres might show.

- **The first step was** to generate an incentive that would attract those centres that were already carrying out actions beyond those related to the provision of initial vocational training courses. The 24 of february of 2020, is dictated the ORDER EDU/122/2020, of February 12, regulating the certification of Professional Excellence Centres for publicly funded educational centres that provide vocational training in the Community of Castile and León. To obtain this certification, interested centres had to present evidence of the actions they were carrying out, taking into account a series of criteria.

Obtaining the certification of excellence did not entail a financial reward or increased resources, but it did position the centre in a better position to obtain resources for the development of applied innovation projects in the calls for proposals issued by the educational administration for this type of action.

Furthermore, it meant a differentiation with the rest of the centres that provide vocational training, which could be an attraction that would ultimately allow for an increase in the number of students enrolled in the centre, which directly allows for an increase in the centre's economic and human resources. About thirty of the 206 centres that provide vocational training in Castile and León participated in this first call.

Before submitting their candidacy, the interested centres self-assessed using a tool developed for that purpose and if they considered that they had options to achieve certification, they formally presented the candidacy providing evidence of the actions they carry out.

The self-assessment tool was designed by the Directorate General for Vocational Training and Special Regime, using the same criteria used by the European Commission to assess the applications submitted to the CoVE call.

Once the application was submitted, an external evaluation team made up of education inspectors evaluated the centre taking into account the evidence presented and verifying the impact of the actions carried out in the centre itself.

The certificate obtained reflected the centre's level. The first level meant that it was beginning the path toward excellence. The second level indicated that it had already taken important steps and was consolidating the actions worthy of a centre of professional excellence. The third level reflected that the centre had consolidated important actions that made it different from the rest and clearly aligned it with the European model of excellence.

Currently, 60 of the 206 centres authorized to provide vocational training courses in Castilla and León have certificates of excellence. These certificates are valid for three years, and proof of excellence must be submitted for renewal.

- **The second step was** to create a Development Support Centre in the areas of teacher training, digitalization, innovation, entrepreneurship, and partnerships (CADDIE-FPCyL). It is a support centre for the development of the European model of excellence.

The mission of this support centre is to disseminate the European model of excellence in vocational training centres in Castilla y León, support its implementation, train its participation in national and European excellence projects, promote the co-creation of skills ecosystems and develop and coordinate a network of centres of excellence in Castilla y León that is connected to other national and European networks.

CADDIE-FPCyL works intensively with companies, business associations, Chambers of Commerce, industry and services of Castilla y León, clusters, social agents and business foundations, vocational training centres and other skills providers to build ecosystems of local capabilities.

- **The third step was** to create a NETWORK OF EXCELLENCE IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING (NEVT) in Castilla and León, based on the European CoVEs model, to promote the development of COMPETENCE ECOSYSTEMS at the regional level.

CADDIE is establishing strategic alliances between the main agents that make up local ecosystems and facilitating the construction of networks at the regional, national and international levels.

- **Finally, the fourth step has been the promotion of diversify actions aligned with the European model of excellence. Among others:**

- **Collaborative projects** in the area of innovation and applied research between vocational training centres and companies. To this end, calls for grants are launched annually to centres and companies for the development of joint innovation projects.
- **The promotion of student and faculty mobility** through the creation of a consortium of centres to facilitate the management and prospecting of companies in other countries.
- **Promoting the internationalization** of centres through their participation in peer-to-peer learning projects and strategic alliances with centres in other countries.
- The development of **regional championships** for professional competitions. See the gallery of images from the latest championships held in April in the city of Valladolid.
<https://servidor.luttongant.com/-skills2025/gallery>
- **Develop a biannual international congress** to address excellence in vocational training.

HOW TO KNOW IF CENTRES ARE ADVANCING TOWARDS EXCELLENCE?

In order to determine whether the vocational training system is moving towards excellence, it is necessary to evaluate its operation. This requires reliable and accurate assessment tools.

Initially, we used a tool of our own design called CACEP based on 22 standards. It is basically an evaluation questionnaire used for self-assessment by the centres and also as a reference for the external evaluation team to determine the degree of development of the European Excellence Model in the vocational training centre.

When we learned about ISATCOVE, we decided to evaluate the possibility of replacing CACEP with ISATCOVE. At the moment, 35 VET centres in Castilla and León are applying ISATCOVE to self-assess within the framework of a pilot Project.

Launched in 2024, ISATCOVE was implemented in three phases, starting with 13 pilot centres and gradually expanding to 60 centres (3rd wave +/- 130). The tool evaluates institutional performance based on:

- 3 Key Dimensions (Governance and Funding; Partnerships and Cooperation; Teaching and Learning) .
- 23 Standards.
- 577 Performance Indicators.

The tool generates detailed analytical reports, helping institutions:

- Identify strengths and weaknesses.
- Develop sustainable improvement/management plans.
- Enhance training quality based on solid evidence and international benchmarks.

The evaluation of vocational excellence in Castilla and León is at a crucial moment of transformation, aimed towards a more comprehensive perspective deeply rooted in the European model. I think that it is a good time to take the next step and better align our approach with those being carried out in other countries and improve the tools we use. In this sense, ISATCOVE represents a good opportunity for us.

From our point of view, ISATCOVE has, at least, these advantages:

First, it has a Comprehensive and Multidimensional Approach: ISATCOVE promotes an evaluation that encompasses the complexity of the VET process, integrating both qualitative and quantitative indicators that more faithfully reflect the educational reality. This allows for a more precise assessment that is adjusted to the diversity of practices and contexts in VET centres.

Second, a significant advantage of ISATCOVE is its ability to incorporate a wide range of stakeholders in the evaluation process, offering a holistic 360-degree view of excellence.

Third, an alignment with the European Model of Excellence.

Four, a greater specificity in Indicators: ISATCOVE includes more specific and detailed indicators.

And finally a good Digital Platform for Accessibility and Efficiency:

I think these are enough reasons to use ISATCOVE in the coming years. For this reasons, eight centres have participated in the pilot plan of this tool and we want to continue participating in its improvement by applying the tool in about thirty more centres in our region.

For Centres of Vocational Education and Training a great advantage of ISATCOVE over other excellence assessment tools is the large number of indicators it has. This set of indicators allows centres to carry out a deep reflection on quality standards. In addition, it enables the centre to focus the analysis on those areas where it can really improve and identify its strengths and weaknesses in a consistent manner.

For instance, teachers didn't understand well the excellence guidelines. ISATCOVE seems like a great advancement due its ability to illustrate what criteria means through a multitude of indicators that can be used as a guide, and for the possibility to make excellence tangible in vocational training centres by sharing good practices.

And also, we asked to assess the centre as a whole, but frequently the centre director assigned the self-assessment to a small group of teachers, when really there should be a group of persons that included more members of the educational community, not only teachers. In this sense, ISATCOVE is also a great tool since it involves a number of stakeholders, and also more members of the vocational centre to be involved in the evaluation.

Another weakness of our tool (CACEP), in my opinion, was not required **a progress plan towards excellence**. The process designed in ISATCOVE to get the AdEx label is a great improvement, since it requires the centre to present a plan for the next years. Now, we are going to incorporate this element into our excellence development strategy.

From my point of view, so that a vocational training centre can walk the path, the way, towards excellence, it must know what its starting point is, where it wants to go and what steps it take to move forward.

The European Centre of Vocational Excellence model is very good, but its implementation requires a good self-assessment and external evaluation tool.

I believe that ISATCOVE has these characteristics. Therefore, I would recommend that centres that wish to follow the path of continuous improvement use it as a roadmap and as a compass to set the course towards excellence.

And I would also recommend ISATCOVE to administrations with competencies in educational and vocational training that are interested in developing the culture of excellence in their vocational training centres.