



European Training Foundation



ETF
Network for
Excellence

TOWARDS VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE:

BUILDING SKILLS ECOSYSTEMS FOR THE FUTURE

Towards vocational excellence:

Building skills ecosystems for the future

Vocational education and training (VET) has long been central to preparing people for work. Today, however, it faces demands far greater than simple job-readiness. Technological disruption, climate change, demographic pressures, and shifting geopolitics are reshaping societies and labour markets. VET is now expected to drive innovation, support inclusion, and contribute to resilience and growth, while still equipping individuals with the skills to secure decent employment.

Against this backdrop, the European Training Foundation (ETF), working with an international community of practitioners and policymakers, launched the Network

for Excellence (ENE). Over the past four years (2021–2024), ENE has brought together more than 330 institutions from over 50 countries to exchange experiences, explore models of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), and co-create approaches to systemic reform.

This summary distils the key insights of that journey. It sets out what vocational excellence means in practice, how CoVEs are developing as orchestrators of skills ecosystems, and what policies and strategies are needed to sustain progress.

A changing skills landscape

Global trends are transforming the nature of work and the demands placed on education. Artificial intelligence, digitalisation, and automation are reshaping entire sectors. The green transition requires new skills in areas such as renewable energy, sustainable production, and circular economy practices. Demographic pressures mean some countries are grappling with ageing populations while others face youth bulges and persistent unemployment. Migration and geopolitical instability add further complexity.

Traditional VET approaches that focus narrowly on immediate occupational skills are no longer enough. Systems must cultivate adaptability, transversal

competences, and lifelong learning pathways. Teachers must be prepared not only to deliver knowledge but to act as facilitators, coaches, and innovators. Institutions must embed research, entrepreneurship, and innovation into their strategies, linking education to economic and social development.

In this context, the ETF and its partners have developed the concept of vocational excellence as both a vision and a practical framework. Excellence is not an elite aspiration for a few, but a systemic approach that positions VET as a driver of competitiveness, inclusion, and resilience.

Defining vocational excellence and the role of CoVEs

Vocational excellence can be understood as a holistic framework that puts learners at the centre and embeds VET institutions within dynamic ecosystems. It means:

- High-quality, relevant provision that responds to evolving labour-market needs.
- Robust quality assurance and transparent qualifications frameworks.
- Opportunities for lifelong learning and flexible progression routes.
- Institutional autonomy and accountability that allow innovation.
- Inclusion as a principle, ensuring equity and attractiveness.
- International engagement and visibility.

Centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs)

embody this framework. They are not a single institutional model, but a flexible concept adapted to national and regional contexts. Some are independent training providers, some part of larger education institutions, some operate as networks or clusters, and others as regional or sectoral hubs. What unites them is their

capacity to act as orchestrators within skills ecosystems, connecting education, research, industry, and society.

ENE experience confirms that successful CoVEs:

- Have sufficient autonomy to innovate and respond quickly.
- Provide strong work-based learning opportunities in partnership with employers.
- Offer qualifications that allow progression into higher education as well as employment.
- Develop entrepreneurship and innovation as part of their mission.
- Engage in applied research and development, feeding knowledge into teaching and local industry.
- Promote inclusion and equity, ensuring no learner is left behind.
- Pursue internationalisation, enhancing quality and reputation through cooperation across borders.

The systemic ingredients of vocational excellence

From ENE's four-year journey, a set of systemic building blocks has emerged. These are features of high-performing VET systems that create fertile ground for CoVEs and excellence to take root:

- Comprehensive National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs): ensuring transparency, portability, and trust in qualifications.
- Robust quality assurance (QA) frameworks: embedded at provider level, ensuring continuous improvement.
- Multi-level governance and funding arrangements: enabling cooperation between national, regional, and local actors, and between public and private partners.
- Regional and sectoral strategies: integrating VET skills provision into wider economic and social development agendas.
- Well-managed VET networks: supporting efficiency, rational provision, and strategic oversight.
- Labour-market intelligence systems: identifying skills needs at national, regional, and sectoral levels.
- Active social partner involvement: ensuring employers and trade unions shape policy and practice.
- Empowered teachers and trainers: supported with professional development, recognition, and decent working conditions.
- Research and development functions: making VET not only a consumer but also a producer of knowledge.
- School autonomy with accountability: giving providers the freedom to innovate while ensuring responsibility.
- Lifelong learning policies: guaranteeing adults' rights to continuing training, with tools such as micro-credentials.
- Career guidance policies: integrated into VET to support informed choices and lifelong career development.
- Integration of digital, green, and entrepreneurial competences: making them central to VET provision.
- Support for internationalisation: through strategies, institutions, and incentives.

These elements, taken together, represent the systemic foundations that allow CoVEs to thrive and VET systems to evolve towards excellence.

Networking: the basis of excellence

Perhaps the most striking lesson of the ENE experience is that excellence cannot develop in isolation. Networking is both a precondition and a condition for excellence.

ENE itself is a powerful example. With 330+ members across 50+ countries, it has become a global community of practice. Thematic partnerships on areas such as work based learning (WBL) autonomy and public-private partnerships, green skills, digitalisation, inclusion, entrepreneurship, and career guidance

have provided platforms for peer learning and policy dialogue.

Networking benefits institutions by exposing them to innovation, benchmarks, and collaboration. It strengthens systems by creating momentum for reform and demonstrating models that can be scaled up. Internationally, it positions VET as a driver of cooperation and mutual learning.

Networking is therefore not an optional extra but a defining feature of excellence.

Tools for self-assessment and recognition

Excellence requires mechanisms to identify strengths and weaknesses, benchmark performance, and track progress. As a result, ENE has prioritised the development of self-assessment tools.

- **ENE Self-Assessment Tool (ENESAT):** launched in 2021, providing a first baseline for institutional reflection
- **International self-assessment tool for CoVEs (ISATCOVE):** developed with the European Commission, structured around 23 criteria and offering different levels of recognition such as Committed to Excellence.

These instruments are not about external auditing but about creating a culture of reflection and improvement leading to excellence-transmission. They help institutions to map their development pathways, provide evidence for policymakers, and build credibility in the eyes of partners.

Evidence from users shows that self-assessment has led to improvements in governance, partnerships, teaching and learning, and innovation and research in VET. It is therefore a core engine of excellence.

Internationalisation as a core dimension

VET has often been seen as a local service, but CoVEs are demonstrating that internationalisation is both possible and beneficial.

Internationalisation brings mobility opportunities for learners and staff, joint curricula and double certifications, and participation in cross-border projects. It exposes institutions to global benchmarks and enhances their reputation. It equips

learners with intercultural competences and global mindsets. It can be a source of revenue for vocational institutions.

ENE experience shows that internationalisation is inseparable from excellence. It raises standards, increases attractiveness, and aligns VET with the prestige traditionally associated with higher education.

Skills ecosystems: a renewed new paradigm

A central conceptual contribution of the ENE has been the framing of CoVEs as orchestrators within skills ecosystems.

Skills ecosystems bring together multiple stakeholders: education and training providers, employers, industry associations, research institutions, government agencies, and civil society. They are characterised by trust, collaboration, and flows of knowledge.

Within these ecosystems, CoVEs:

- Align training with industrial strategies and smart specialisation priorities.

- Promote innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Support regional and sectoral development.
- Address socio-economic challenges, from skills shortages to inclusion gaps.

This explains why CoVEs cannot be defined by one model but by their function as catalysts of collaboration and innovation.

Policy implications

From this experience, several overarching policy implications can be drawn.

1. Institutionalise excellence: Embed CoVEs within transparent recognition and accreditation systems, ensuring credibility and sustainability.
2. Strengthen systemic ingredients: Invest in NQFs, QA, governance, social partner engagement, and career guidance as foundations of excellence.
3. Empower institutions: Grant CoVEs autonomy with accountability, and invest in teachers, trainers, and leaders.
4. Use practical tools: Promote widespread use of ENESAT and ISATCOVE as drivers of improvement and recognition.
5. Support networking: Ensure CoVEs are integrated into multi-level networks and ecosystems, linking local provision with national strategies and international cooperation.
6. Embrace internationalisation: Recognise global engagement as a core component of excellence, not a peripheral option.
7. Promote lifelong learning: Ensure policies and resources enable adults to reskill and upskill, with flexible pathways and recognition of micro-credentials.
8. Cultivate Innovation: Embed R&D functions into VET, support applied research, and encourage entrepreneurial approaches
9. Cultivate Innovation: Embed R&D functions into VET, support applied research, and encourage entrepreneurial approaches.

Conclusion:

excellence as a shared journey

The journey towards vocational excellence is dynamic and evolving. It requires vision, persistence, and strong collaboration. It cannot be achieved by single institutions alone, nor by policymakers acting in isolation. It is built through communities of practice, through international networking, and through the empowerment of teachers, learners, and local and international partners.

The past four years of the ENE project show that VET can transform itself into a driver of innovation, inclusion, and competitiveness. By creating CoVEs and skills ecosystems, countries can strengthen their economies and societies while offering citizens meaningful opportunities for having decent working and living conditions.

Excellence in VET is not a fixed state but a process of continuous improvement. It is about embedding creativity, adaptability, and trust into the heart of vocational education and training. It is about ensuring that VET is not a second choice but a pathway of opportunity and prestige.

The ETF and its partners remain committed to this agenda. Together with policymakers, practitioners, and communities, we are co-creating a future in which VET systems are resilient, inclusive, and future-ready.

For further information, including case studies and detailed recommendations, please consult the full ETF publication: *A Road to Excellence: International Networking on VET Excellence and Centres of Vocational Excellence for Co-Creating Skills Ecosystems* (ETF, 2025). <https://openspace.etf.europa.eu/resources/report-road-excellence-international-networking-vet-excellence-and-centres-vocational>

CoVEs concept implementation: Main types





European Training Foundation



www.etf.europa.eu



www.youtube.com/user/etfeuropa



www.facebook.com/etfeuropa



www.instagram.com/etfeuropa



www.linkedin.com/company/etfeuropa



openspace.etf.europa.eu



bsky.app/profile/etf.europa.eu