
Networking for Vocational Excellence: An International Network of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)

Abstract

The European Training Foundation's (ETF) Network for Excellence (ENE), kickstarted at the end of 2020. ENE has been well received, consolidated, expanded and (2021-2023) by international Vocational Education and Training (VET) communities working towards excellence. ENE is currently composed of 265 Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) from more than 40 countries around the world. Up to now, ENE is a unique international platform addressing Vocational Excellence for sharing CoVEs practices, peer-to-peer learning among practitioners, building synergies to forge partnerships among its members (etc.). ENE aims to share knowledge and experience to help CoVEs to develop and improve through international policy learning and, perhaps, transform the ETF experience of policy dialogue and advice in some countries. The ETF's Network for Excellence (ENE) is inspired by the European Commission-led initiative in EU countries. This approach fits within both the new EU Skills Agenda and the Osnabruck Declaration (2020). ENE also contributes to the international dimension of the Erasmus+ programme and responds to ETF experience in working together with Partner Countries (PCs) to further VET Excellence as a key driver in support of VET and Lifelong Learning (LLL), providing relevant skills in the labour market. CoVE experience might also play a key role in rethinking institutional network set-ups. ENE thematic approaches build on ten core themes shaping Vocational Excellence and CoVE operations. Among other services, ENE offers a self-assessment tool (ENESAT) to support CoVEs network members' self-evaluation of excellence, in order to develop, improve and/or transmit excellence to other parts of the VET system.

This article will examine this unique experience and provide learnings to support discussions and implications for further policy development at international level.

Keywords: *TVET, vocational excellence, ETF's Network for Excellence (ENE)*

1 Introduction: Networking is an Art

Networking – in particular as a professional activity- should be conceived as an art. Networking and networks are generally considered to have high potential for solving structural problems in education. The creation of a specific form of organization, namely a network, as well as the particularly qualitative orientation in building up cooperative structures and links can be described as networking (Bienzle et al. 2007).

Networks are vital knowledge tools for managing complexity, sourcing inspiration, and boosting cooperation, whilst contributing to the improvement of both individual and

collective capacities of members. Networks facilitate co-creation processes and the transference or transmission of new knowledge, highly rewarding in terms of self-motivation, whilst also giving our best to others. On this journey, the life experience of many networks facilitates working together effectively in approaching systemic change (e.g., impact on governance modes and models of public policy areas).

Established in 2020, the Network for Excellence (ENE) is the flagship approach of the European Training Foundation (<https://www.etf.europa.eu/en>) for international networking in the service of VET Excellence. Composed of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) all around the world, it focuses on ETF partner countries, due primarily to the complexity of the Vocational Excellence operational concept. This is designed to provide CoVE network members with opportunities to collaborate nationally and internationally, including CoVEs within European Member States (MS) and beyond, as well as those in ETF partner countries.

ENE is founded on the principle of supporting CoVE members on with mutual learning experiences (peer to peer) and identifying developmental needs which arise in transmitting excellence to other parts of the system. All this might reasonably help the international community to move together towards excellence in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and learning on key capacities for managing further CoVE institutional set-ups.

2 The European Union as a source of inspiration for international networking in Vocational Excellence and Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)

Vocational Excellence in the European Union (EU) as a flagship policy approach, has been shaped since the Copenhagen Process in Vocational Education and Training (VET) was launched more than 20 years ago. (The Copenhagen process is the cornerstone of so-called enhanced cooperation in Vocational Education in the European Union. In 2002, the EU Member States, social partners, the candidate countries, the EFTA/EEA countries and the Commission set the overall framework and priorities for the modernisation of VET in Europe, based on solid principles of mutual cooperation and learning among member states with the aim of making EU VET systems recognized worldwide references.)

The Copenhagen declaration (2002) expresses the vision and ambition of European Member State governments together with social partners to secure high-quality Vocational Education and Training policies and systems. The subsequent declaration (CEDEFOP 2004) is even more explicit in referring to the objective of having VET systems in Europe capable of achieving high quality and innovation.

From the Helsinki Communique (CEDEFOP 2006) to the Osnabruck declaration (CEDEFOP 2020), Vocational Excellence has been highlighted as a key strategic, political, and systemic objective in European Member states, investing in the promotion of VET skills excellence, as well as recommending EU MSs to steer innovative policy reforms focusing on VET Excellence, and addressing sustainability and digitalisation.

According to the European Commission (EC) (2019), the concept of Vocational Excellence entails a holistic learner-centred approach in which Vocational Education and Training (VET) (European Commission 2022)

- is an *integrative part of skills ecosystems*, contributing to regional development, innovation, and smart specialisation strategies.
- is part of *research, education, and innovation*, working closely with other education and training sectors, the scientific community, and business.
- enables *learners to acquire both vocational and key competences through high-quality education* that is supported by quality assurance, builds innovative forms of partnerships with the world of work, and is accompanied by the continuous professional development of teaching and training staff, innovative teaching methods, mobility and internationalization strategies.

The EC concept of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) builds on the strong idea that different forms of entities formed by network of partners should help to developing local skills ecosystems to provide high-quality vocational skills to both young people and adults, and contribute to regional development, innovation, industrial clusters, smart specialization strategies and social inclusion.

Working with CoVEs in other countries through international collaborative networks, they establish a bottom-up approach to vocational excellence, involving a wide range of local stakeholders. This enables VET institutions to adapt quickly with regard to skills provision, evolving economic and social needs. Local business development and innovation is stimulated by working closely with companies - SMEs in particular - on applied research projects, creating knowledge and innovation hubs, as well as supporting entrepreneurial initiatives of their learners.

In this context, DG Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion launched an initiative on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) to respond to this priority policy aimed at supporting radical reforms in the VET sector. These funded initiatives (2021-2027) are embedded into the Erasmus EU programme for Education, Youth and Sport (+) as Key Action 2.

This action supports the gradual establishment and development of international collaborative networks of Centres of Vocational Excellence operating at both national, local, and international levels (European Commission 2023). This is planned to take be enacted chiefly in the 2020-2027 period.

Promising projects have been earmarked for this period and it is worth noting that project leaders of all Erasmus CoVEs have set up a bottom-up CoVE Community of Practice. This is aimed at sharing experiences, mutual inspiration, and finding solutions together for common issues they encounter while implementing CoVE approaches (COPCOVES n.d.).

The ETF experience encompasses VET Excellence policy development and CoVEs rationales (as forward-looking institutional recipients), predicated on EU MSs and EU partner countries' neighbourhood and beyond rationales. In a nutshell, these are:

- Full speed development of technological change and digitalisation (automation, robotization, AI - Artificial Intelligence, etc.);
- Climate change; demographic trends; new forms of work; pertinent anticipation and responses to the rapidly changing skills needs of the labour market (shortages, gaps, and so on); industry sectors with high growth potential; lack of motivation of VET graduates to fill vacancies;
- Youth unemployment and ways of addressing VET graduates; fair recognition of employment status; increased access of adults to continued learning – obsolescence of employment qualifications (reskilling, upskilling etc.).
- Enhancing effective and efficient communication between the worlds of education and work (e.g., forging public-private partnerships - PPPs);
- Emerging and evolving innovative methods for teaching, training and learning;
- Other disruptive global and local phenomena (e.g., COVID 19).

3 Networking for Vocational Excellence: the case of the ETF Network for Excellence – ENE (2020-2023)

3.1 Exploring the ground for international networking on VET Excellence among CoVEs

The European Training Foundation (ETF), working in close cooperation and building strong synergies with EC DG Employment Social Affairs and Inclusion (in particular, since 2018), supports policy dialogue and analysis-mapping exercises. This last activity has identified three key success factors for VET Excellence and CoVEs development in the short, medium, and long term (European Commission 2019):

- a. Strong and enduring partnerships between stakeholders, VET providers (including VET at a higher level), higher education institutions and businesses, engaging in reciprocal and mutually beneficial interactions (European Commission n.d.a).
- b. Being firmly anchored into the frameworks of regional development, innovation and smart specialization. Allowing for the identification of synergies between policies and amongst stakeholders, avoiding ad hoc actions, which, although they may be beneficial, do not realise all potential benefits in isolation.
- c. Integration of activities. CoVEs achieving more than the sum of their parts, building reflexive relationships between activities and research.

This mapping was complemented by additional ETF mapping with partner countries. This exercise was conducted in both EU MS and neighbourhood countries. It posits that CoVEs might be defined and operationally approached as follows (ETF 2020a):

- Engines for VET development. This refers to high level quality VET skills institutions to support employability and matching LM needs - beacons for VET reforms - within a lifelong learning perspective.
- CoVEs can build on diverse VET traditions and cultures in EU Member States, ETF Partner Countries (PCs), and international countries (e.g. types of VET institutions, nomenclatures, public and private sector capacities, education, training and skills policy development, etc.).
- CoVEs are good examples of international practices: network organizations of VET providers are leaders.
- VET institutions with a high commitment to promoting change, continuous development and improvement.
- Examples of effective partnerships between public & private (PPPs) arrangements (key public and private stakeholders shaping skill ecosystems).
- Hubs for transfer of good practices -at regional local, national sectoral, and international levels (partners progressing with VET internationalization).
- CoVEs should be seeing as ambassadors for promoting inclusive excellence: transmitting excellence should be CoVEs' core business, helping national, regional/local/sectoral and international networks. CoVEs, by definition, are networkers. Transmission of VET Excellence should also occur at policy level.

Thus, CoVEs might be defined as partnership-oriented vocational education and training-network organizations, shaping skills ecosystems of excellence and innovation to provide high-level skilled specialists required by national and international labour markets, as well as contributing to the development of national and regional economies (Galvin Arribas 2020).

3.2 CoVEs joining ENE as a consolidated operational community of international practitioners in Vocational Excellence

Building on such findings and experience, the ETF Network for Excellence (ENE) was formally launched at the end of 2020 (ETF 2020d). The ETF's Network for Excellence (ENE) is an international network of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and high-quality VET providers in their respective contexts. ENE has been inspired by European policies (European Commission 2020), practices, and initiatives in EU countries, contributing to the international dimension of the Erasmus (+) programme (European Commission n.d.b).

ENE responds to ETF experience working together with its partner countries (PCs), moving towards VET Excellence as a key driver to support VET and Lifelong Learning (LLL). The aim is to provide relevant skills in international labour markets. Some ETF PCs have aspired for some years to set up CoVEs as institutional innovation hubs, embracing VET reform processes and systematic modernization.

Furthermore, the option of setting up CoVEs plays a key role in rethinking institutional, mostly public-oriented VET network set-ups in the European Neighbourhood (e.g., rationalization, VET network optimization). Such rationales, for instance, might be found in

the Western Balkans (e.g., North-Macedonia, Serbia), Turkey, South Mediterranean and/or Eastern European countries such as Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine (Galvin Arribas et al. 2020).

The main ingredients of ETF/ENE build towards implementing networking modalities for VET Excellence, as well as contributing to CoVE development. The focus is on the following dimensions (ETF 2020c):

- The complexity of Vocational Excellence as a multi-faceted/multidimensional concept. VET Excellence should comprise different thematic areas shaping CoVE operations. CoVEs are multifunctional institutional hubs (deploying extended functions; having a sectoral, cross-sectoral remit; networking roles etc.).
- Innovation and networking functions embedded into the excellence factor: this means systematically mobilizing expertise, applying cooperation/collaboration to raise the bar compared to other providers.
- Networking provides a golden opportunity to improve, by sharing experience and examples of high-level performance to implement institutional partnerships with industrial actors and other public stakeholders for excellence and innovation.
- Professional networking facilitates the creation of a continuous feedback loop between schools, companies, and public actors or governments (public-private cooperation).
- Networking activities often take place before a CoVE is set up, and again when the CoVE is established. Overall, networking is a core function of the continuous search for excellence.
- Networking can be a reason in itself to create a CoVE. This is based on the assumption that, in a highly competitive global economy, institutions that excel in their domain are attractive partners on the global scene. Networking is crucial for local and international CoVEs development.

Nowadays, ENE might be considered as a fully consolidated international platform or community of practitioners on VET Excellence from the perspective of LLL. The first unit of analysis is the CoVE. Building on this approach, ENE has a transnational or transversal (international) geographical remit to foster good practice, beyond the boundaries of national- and sub-national, local policy frameworks.

ENE helps to implement VET internationalization through the VET excellence concept which responds to the nature, mandate and ambition of CoVEs, for example, by supporting the internationalization of knowledge, products and services (in different areas of skills development, including knowledge services, mobility of teachers and learners, training programmes, etc.), whilst boosting a culture of continuous improvement, through collaboration and partnerships with other national, international – public and private partners – and other types of stakeholders.

ETF-ENE offers a platform for partnerships and peer learning activities among its members. ENE continues to grow as a policy-oriented source of information and knowledge.

Table 1: **ENE main working targets at both practitioner and policy level** (own elaboration based on ETF (2020a) and ENE experience - lessons learned (2021-2023))

<p><i>Direct</i> CoVEs needs to work towards developmental approaches via:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - opportunities to learn directly from practice in relation to the functions or services that CoVEs seek to improve and develop, (e.g. as lifelong learning providers, incubators, etc.). - better understanding of the structural preconditions and capabilities they need and how they may be developed, (e.g. operation of financial, managerial, pedagogic CoVE autonomy/self-governance). - co-creation and access to useful instruments for assessment, planning, managerial tools (etc.). - helping to find-tailored- partners for international projects and/or peer learning (etc.). - supporting CoVEs’ critical thinking - identifying areas for improvement or domains in which CoVEs might play a role - coaching or being coached - to learn, develop, improve (etc.). 	<p><i>Indirectly</i> addressing needs of policy players - in ETF partner countries and on an international level via:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improving understanding of variety of CoVEs, their evolutive forms, development and relevance for Human Capital Development (HCD)-policies and systems worldwide. - monitoring CoVEs development over time (e.g building a self-assessment tool (ENESAT), peer learning experiences and learning outcomes, addressing research gaps, etc.). - disseminating results to ETF PCs and the international community to build a comprehensive but critical understanding of how CoVEs can contribute to national provider networks and national HCD strategies, feeding into other policy reforms related to education and training (etc.). - continuously engaging the Vocational Excellence International Community to keep up to date, providing feedback on relevant policy learning needs to support policy development and helping to understand policy advice gaps relating to VET Excellence/CoVE.
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ENE - CoVE - members are fully committed to improving the functions, processes, organisational characteristics and relations with partners that characterize CoVEs. They are also committed to national and international collaboration and, in particular, to sharing practices with other ENE members and beyond.

The international network is open to members from all countries and includes individual training providers, clusters of providers and centres that coordinate other providers. Policymakers (ministries, other national and regional stakeholders) from ETF partner countries, EU Member States and beyond are invited to engage in the actions of the network. The main requirements for joining ENE are:

- Endorsement by the relevant national, and/or sub-national local authority
- Engagement in specific themes to develop Vocational Excellence.
- Commitment to the network.
- Self-expression of interest from CoVEs, autonomous VET public, private or PPP oriented-providers, and/or umbrella providers organization (e.g. international NGOs, VET provider associations etc.).
- As a knowledge-binding requirement, applying members are asked to sign the ENE registry and conduct the process of self-assessment by using the ENESAT corporate tool. When both requirements have been accomplished, CoVEs can formally be considered ENE members.

Consolidation and expansion of the ENE has been particularly strong since 2021. Membership of ENE is steadily growing. ENE is currently composed of 273 Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) from more than 40 countries (ETF PCs, EU MSs -and beyond) (taken from Data ETF/ENE Registry on 15/06/2023).

The ENE has a particular focus on CoVEs operating in the EU’s neighbouring countries, but it also includes CoVEs in EU Member States, Sub-Saharan Africa and other countries. It aims to build partnerships and to share practices between groups of CoVEs – wherever they might be located around the world.

Table 2: **Overview on total number of ENE CoVE Members by geographical area**
(note: CoVE type can be Fully Public; Combined Financing; Public & Private Institutions; Fully Private)

GEOGRAPHICAL REMIT	NUMBER OF COVES BY COUNTRY	(SUB) TOTAL
ETF Partner Countries (PCs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Turkey (57), Israel (6); Armenia (5); Azerbaijan (8); Morocco (5); Georgia (5); Kazakhstan (5); Moldova (8); North Macedonia (4); Montenegro (1) Tunisia (8); Serbia (6); Albania (2); Ukraine (30); Egypt (4); Palestine (1) 	155
EU Members States (MSs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spain (60); Greece (1); Netherlands (4); Finland (2); Italy (7); Slovenia (2); Latvia (2); Germany (2), Sweden (1), Denmark (1) 	82

<p>Other International Areas/Countries</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Sub-Saharan Africa</u>: Angola (2); Burkina Faso (4); Democratic Republic of Congo (2); Guinea Bissau (4); Ivory Coast (2); Kenya (2); Malawi (1); Mozambique (2); Namibia (1); Niger (1); Senegal (4); South Africa (1); Uganda (1); Zimbabwe (3). ▪ <u>Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)</u>: Philippines (1). ▪ <u>European Free Trade Association (EFTA)</u>: Switzerland (3). ▪ <u>Australia (Victoria State)</u> (1) 	<p>36</p>
<p>TOTAL ENE CoVEs</p>		<p>273</p>

The profile of ENE CoVE status informed by financing models was shared by 160 CoVEs (up to current 270 ENE CoVEs). More than half (53%) of CoVEs are financed from public sources. Around 28% of CoVEs are financed from combined sources, including donor support, whereas 15% of CoVEs are financed through a public-private partnership model. Only 4% of CoVEs are financed from private financial resources (see total numbers on distribution below (Figure 1)).

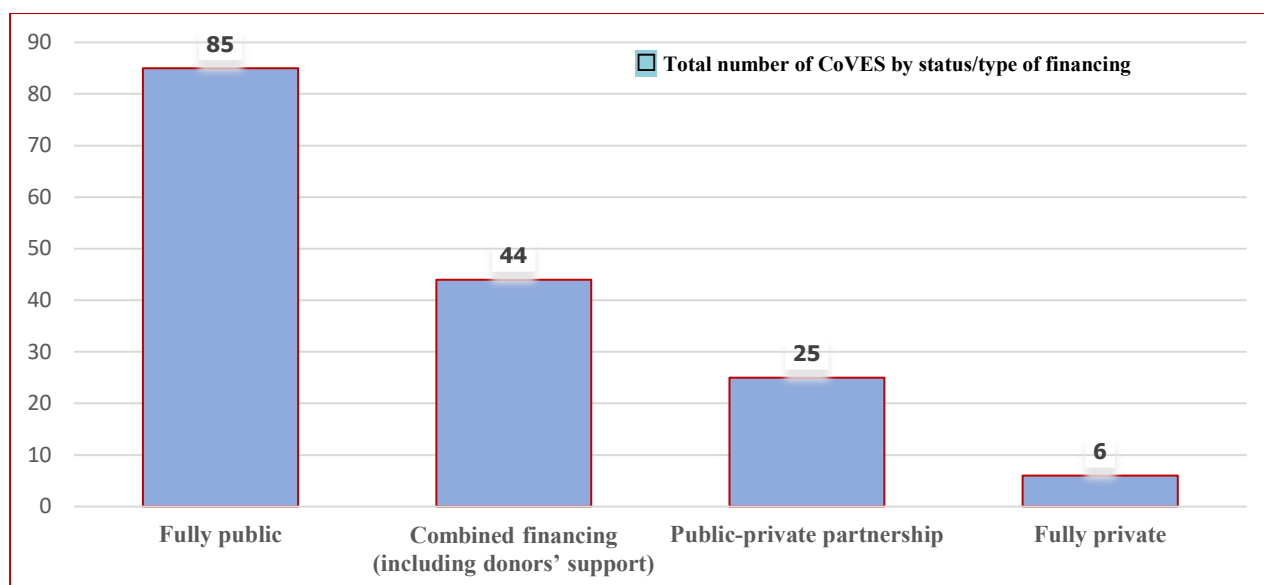


Figure 1: ENE CoVE profiles: status based on financing models (Source: ENE Registry (N= 160 ENE CoVEs shared information on status and financing models))

The phases of education offered by ENE CoVEs range from ISCED 2 to 5. This also goes up to level 6, including ENE CoVEs which are higher education institutions - mostly

polytechnics, colleges institutions - offering VET programmes, as well as those CoVEs which offer non-formal adult learning / Continuing Education and Training (CVT) pathways.

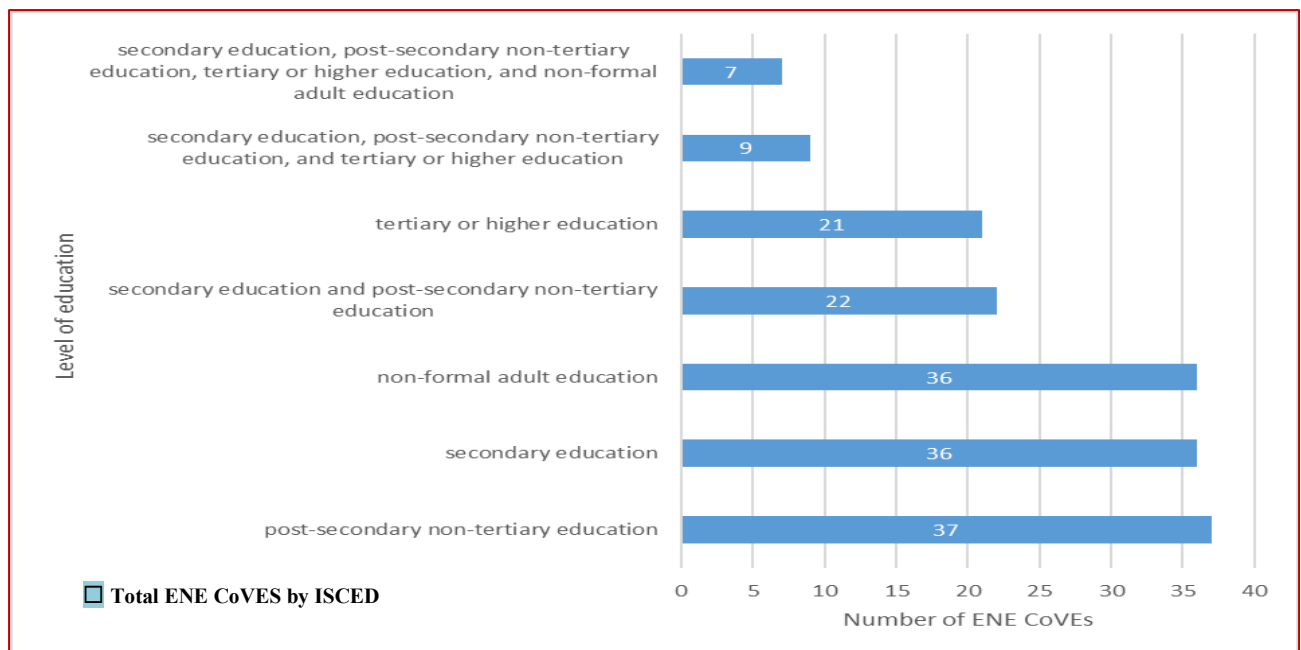


Figure 2: ENE CoVEs distribution by ISCED levels (Source: ENE Registry 2023 (N= 168 ENE CoVEs shared information on ISCED levels))

3.3 The ETF Network for Excellence (ENE) - promoting VET learning policies and CoVE internationalization

The ETF-ENE approach to Vocational Excellence builds on 10 core themes which are captured in the ENE Self-Assessment Tool (ENESAT) to support CoVEs’ self-evaluation and expressed as thematic excellence dimensions. This is designed to help CoVEs develop, improve and/or possibly identify areas of expertise to support transmission of excellence to other centres, network members, international partners, stakeholders, and other parts of the VET system.

The 10 themes currently shaping the ENE approach to Vocational Excellence as informed by the ENESAT are the following:

- Lifelong learning in vocational education and training – from initial to continuing training and adult education pathways - from VET to higher education (and vice versa).
- Entrepreneurial Centres of Vocational Excellence.
- Education-business collaboration and cooperation.
- Pedagogy and professional development.
- Smart specialization – Mobilizing innovation, ecosystems and SMEs.

- Industry 4.0 and digitalization.
- Autonomy and PPPs in VET skills development.
- Going green – supporting sustainable goals.
- Social inclusion, equity and excellence.
- Career education and guidance in Vocational Excellence.

The approach taken by the ENE, focusing in particular on ENE CoVEs using ENESAT, is intended to reflect the needs and interests of its members by distinguishing three distinct perspectives - or pathways for the development of excellence (ETF 2021):

- i) The range of functions or services that a CoVE performs (a CoVE may pursue excellence by offering more functions or services).
- ii) The quality or effectiveness of the functions or services (a CoVE can pursue excellence by seeking to perform its functions better and so obtain better results for learners and other beneficiaries).
- iii) The collective or average level of excellence achieved by a group of CoVEs (e.g. between all ENE Members, or between all of the vocational schools and centres in a particular sector or country).

The **ENE Self-Assessment Tool (ENESAT)** has been developed to enable members of the ENE network to develop a better understanding of different dimensions and levels of excellence and to understand their own current level of development:

- **ENESAT is the ENE framework for collecting evidence on Vocational Excellence** and helps CoVEs to align their own development with that of other members of the network.
- It also **generates a database that helps ENE to identify the developmental priorities** of its members and is helping the ETF to focus its interventions on those priorities.
- **The Self-Assessment Tool is designed to help CoVEs - schools and centres - to reflect upon their own state of development and to plan their next steps.**
- In addition, the ETF can use the Self-Assessment tool to **help ENE members to find other peers** with whom they can exchange and share practice and to find development partners with whom they can collaborate.
- The tool proposes **150 indicators** across **10 core thematic dimensions** to support CoVEs' self-assessment, progressing towards shaping Vocational Excellence (maturity level model).

Figure 3: ENE Self-Assessment Tool Purposes (ENESAT) (Source: ETF 2021)

The ENE approach to VET Excellence is inclusive and builds on the transmission of the VET Excellence concept as a strategic goal. CoVEs might operate in cooperation with other entities and training institutions, research centres, local public authorities, companies, innovation and research hubs (etc.). They are beacons and/or positive use cases which should

inform ongoing national and local reforms by transmitting good practice in different dimensions of excellence, generally matching national policy priorities (ETF n.d.)

Since its creation, the Network for Excellence (ENE) has aim to fulfil a huge gap addressing good learning practices to implement both Vocational Excellence and CoVE concepts at an international level. It is important to remember that the facilitation of the international ENE community builds strongly on mutual learning approaches (peer to peer), the sharing of practices and ideas, and relevant – successful - experiences between CoVEs. ENE is, indeed, conceived as a tool for VET internationalization.

VET Internationalization is embedded into ENE operationalization, relying on CoVEs’ nature, capacities, and learning ambitions to support internationalizing knowledge, products and services (in different areas of skills development, including knowledge services, mobility of teachers and learners). ENE helps to boost a culture of continuous improvement, through collaboration and partnerships with other national, international public and private partners, and other stakeholders.

The main ENE working modality is shaping developmental CoVE thematic partnerships which are formed by group of CoVEs working together to improve in specific domains, informing and transmitting excellence. This means sharing developments and institutional approaches through key practices, projects, partnerships, which are shared over a period of time (ETF 2019). At the same time, CoVEs leading such thematic partnerships in cooperation with ENE experts/leaders may identify (self-assess) specific developmental needs or methodologies to create and engage other partners and practices.

Table 3: Overview of ENE Thematic Partnerships (sub-initiatives) addressing developmental CoVEs’ approach to Vocational Excellence (2020-2023)
(Source: own elaboration)

ENE Thematic Partnership	Main focus, learning approaches and outcomes	CoVEs by country
The Role of CoVEs in Work-Based Learning (WBL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The role of CoVEs supporting WBL was the main question for ENE CoVE groups. This included the formation of partnerships (by 6 ETF PCs) and peer learning based on Baltic Countries experiences. Key tools developed for facilitating learning experiences among peers included a baseline study, evaluation and coaching CoVE members. 	Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia and Moldova.
CoVEs Autonomy & Public Private	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Autonomy is a core component for CoVE development and vital for collaborating with private partners. ENE developed two analyses for supporting CoVE partnerships: a baseline 	Azerbaijan, Georgia (2), Morocco, Kazakhstan,

Partnerships (PPPs)	study (quantitative) to enhance understanding, as well as digging deeper into CoVE processes and practices as main inputs for excellence, working with the private sector. Two study visits (Finland, Netherlands) were also implemented by CoVEs.	Spain (2), Turkey (2), Tunisia, Ukraine (2).
Entrepreneurial CoVEs (ENTRECoVEs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ENTRECoVEs aimed at integrating EC vision and practice for entrepreneurship by promoting it at VET provider level. An interdisciplinary CoVE partnership has been created, structured around four dimensions: teaching and learning processes; organizational practices; products and services, and a new ecosystem. Key outcomes include targeted peer learning, webinars and coaching sessions with CoVEs. 	Georgia, Moldova, Tunisia, Morocco, Azerbaijan.
Greening Responses to Excellence through Thematic Actions (GRETA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ GRETA aims to support CoVEs' development to contribute to the greening of VET and digital transition. As a key starting point for GRETA partnerships (18 CoVEs from 8 countries), core members conducted mutual peer reviews to evaluate their own progress. Peer learning and review activities targeted six thematic webinars for learning and sharing practice, working with relevant international community partners. 	Armenia (1), Georgia (1), Latvia (1), Serbia (1), Slovenia (1), Spain (2), Turkey (3), Ukraine (8).
Digitalization of Teaching and Training (DIGI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ DIGI focuses on the digitalization of teaching and learning practices in CoVEs, on how digital practices can enrich learning pathways and outcomes of students. This is designed to better understand how teachers in CoVEs are applying innovative methodologies. Webinars and calls on CoVE development projects on digitalization have supported ENE members in expanding digital education and learning inside CoVEs. 	Open to all ENE members. Development project cases from: Azerbaijan, Mozambique (2), South Africa, Moldova, Georgia (2).
Sharing Innovation in Social Inclusion (SISI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social inclusion and equity are, by definition, crucial Vocational Excellence dimensions. CoVEs practise social inclusion via innovative teaching, learning and digital and technological 	Georgia, Turkey, Israel, Albania, Serbia,

	tools; Work-based learning, peer learning activities and thematic webinars allow ENE SISI members to continue to engage with EU (e.g. ERASMUS +)	Zimbabwe, Malawi.
Career Guidance (CG) CoVEs and VET Excellence (*)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Achieving high quality or excellence in career guidance through the exploration of CoVEs' role has been key to the ENE approach. The main elements include: a) career guidance in ENESAT b) creating awareness of the role of CoVEs in CG c) sharing good practice to enhance and develop COVE services d) advancing a model of excellence for career education and guidance to support COVEs. 	EU cases (e.g. Germany, Latvia, Ireland)

Note (*) Career guidance has not been addressed as a thematic partnership, but rather as a thematic approach, streamlined to ENE working dynamics during the period 2021-23.

Further, strengthening the international dimension of CoVE is crucial for supporting both ETF/ENE and European Commission services on VET Excellence. In this respect, the ETF is implementing a Service Level Agreement (SLA) on behalf of EC-DG Employment (from November 2021 until the end of 2023) to deliver an EU international self-assessment tool (ISATCOV) linked to a pilot process for awarding and/or labelling CoVEs plus developing key research (case studies) on the role of CoVEs approaching twin transition and in Applied Research to VET (ETF n.d.).

4 Key lessons learned: ENE benefits, challenges and the way forward

Across these pages, it is explained that ENE aims to support improvements in vocational education by bringing together excellent providers worldwide to share best practices, both to collaborate and to innovate. The ENE has the specific mission to extend the benefits of networking to CoVEs based in the ETF's Partner Countries – and to help CoVEs within the EU and those from other countries around the world to network with CoVEs in ETF PCs. The ENE aims to support its members to develop excellence in functional and thematic areas that they choose to prioritize, as well as in the provision of training.

The ETF - via ENE - places particular emphasis on the potential of CoVEs to lead improvement, enhance relevance and to raise attractiveness of the entire VET system. In many countries, policymakers see CoVEs as engines for systemic improvement, but their capacity to perform this role depends upon their character as organizations, the capabilities of their leaders and staff, their relationships with their skills ecosystems and their capacity to collaborate with other vocational schools and centres. CoVEs' international capacity is also vital to fulfilling expectations of becoming institutional drivers for systemic change in VET within a lifelong learning perspective.

Key lessons were learned emerge from ENE practice and experience initiatives covering the two and a half year period from late 2020 to mid-2023:

➤ **Networking as a precondition of working towards VET Excellence and CoVE concept implementation for further institutional development.**

Up to now, ENE has been a unique international platform addressing Vocational Excellence for sharing CoVE practices, peer to peer learning among practitioners, building synergies to forge partnerships among its members (etc.). ENE experience aims at using shared knowledge to help CoVEs to improve further through international policy learning and, perhaps, transform this ETF experience on policy dialogue and advice in some countries.

Building Vocational Excellence is unquestionably a complex task. CoVEs are ambassadors who, in some contexts, might be operating in isolation. However, the ENE role has proven to be very effective and widely acknowledged as a valuable supporter of CoVEs worldwide in their efforts to become part of an internationally recognized community. ENE CoVEs are working together towards implementation of their national mandates, informing on VET Excellence with an international common house to solve problems cooperatively, facing challenges, creating, discovering and finding inspiration among themselves.

For all this, CoVEs, as network organizations, need to continue building via networking at local and international levels to build VET Excellence in close cooperation with a wide array of partners, forging networking approaches embedded into institutional arrangements.

➤ **European policies and practices as driving forces for operationalizing Vocational Excellence and CoVEs worldwide**

Overall, the European Commission (EC) approach via DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion has been a strong asset for ETF in pursuit of Vocational Excellence, setting up ENE as an international arena to bring partners and peers together, sharing expertise, building partnerships, developing and transmitting excellence to others and to other parts of the system.

On top of that, European approaches to Vocational Excellence are built progressively in different stages and integrated into European patrimony on education and training (e.g. the Copenhagen Process). On such a journey, European institutions have taken the brand on board and operationalized the CoVE concept, which is progressively gaining acknowledgement on a worldwide scale. Both ENE and the EC - via Erasmus (+) - are playing key roles in this international scenario.

➤ **The consolidation of the CoVE concept is a work in progress, evolving towards worldwide implementation**

Some years ago the CoVE concept was clearly in its formative stages in the European Union - and some other countries. National VET systems - cultures and traditions – around the world have their own nomenclature for these institutions or entities (e.g. Industrial Centres, Centres

of Expertise, Regional VET Centres, Competence Centres; Colleges, Community Colleges, and so forth). Nowadays, CoVEs concepts have been progressively acknowledged for implementation (in European member states (MSs), ETF PCs and beyond), especially since Erasmus (+) K2 (Key Action 2) funding for 12 pilot CoVE projects in 2019-2020.

ENE as an international network is witnessing how operational processes regarding CoVE conceptual implementation are informed by European approaches. Overall, the CoVE concept reveals that such institutional set-ups are multifunctional in terms of networking: sectoral and multisectoral educational entities delivering high quality skills, strongly connected to regional and local socioeconomic development. CoVEs are also drivers and hubs for forging alliances among public and private stakeholders, geared to modernizing VET within the perspective of LLL.

In other words, CoVEs are formed by networks of different partners that develop local skills ecosystems at both a national and international level. ENE experience informs that, typically, four types of CoVE shape its operational concept:

- high-quality single Vocational Education and Training institutions.
- high-quality single Vocational Education and Training institutions in collaboration with other VET providers (leading role as networkers).
- a cluster of a number of high-quality Vocational Education and Training institutions (e.g. at a sectoral, regional/local level).
- an ecosystem (platform) composed of high-quality VET providers, universities of applied sciences, employers, research centres, development agencies, employment services, local authorities (etc.).

➤ **ENE network as a key international reference point, facilitating thematically oriented policy learning on VET Excellence towards CoVE development.**

ENE experience notes ten successful themes shaping the ETF corporate approach to Vocational Excellence. ENE CoVEs and other stakeholders, experts, policy players involved in ENE working dynamics are widely acknowledging the role played by the thematic ENE *menu*. These themes and ENE CoVE partnerships, implementing knowledge sharing and learning approaches, are up to date, pertinent and are now fulfilling the current learning needs of ENE CoVEs.

ETF/ENE team experience assesses that those CoVEs actively participating in network dynamics are experiencing good progress towards self-identification of needs to perform better on ENE thematic excellence areas (e.g. excellence in green skills, sustainable development; excellence in social inclusion and equity; excellence in the digitalization of teaching and learning; excellence on entrepreneurial approaches to VET). This means that ENE actions are helping ENE CoVEs to focus on the thematic areas they seek to excel in. Furthermore, this allows ENE CoVEs to improve in other thematic areas which, through self-assessment, have been identified as less developed (foundational).

In other words, VET excellence is composed of different elements which are relatively independent of each another. It therefore makes sense for CoVEs to make strategic decisions about which dimensions or areas of excellence they want to focus upon – rather than aiming to pursue excellence in all dimensions (ETF 2021).

All this is essential to complement CoVE self-assessment processes and to be taken into account when discussing possible processes for awarding and/or labelling CoVEs at both national and international levels. In summary, the key benefits of ENE membership are:

- the opportunity to be part of a knowledge-sharing international peer learning/review community, inspired by VET thematic areas of excellence. This helps to improve CoVE capacity for internationalization.
- the opportunity for CoVEs to find suitable partners for participation in EU/ international projects (e.g. Erasmus +).
- the opportunity for CoVEs to be recognized as good international reference points for national and international programmes (CoVEs increased visibility and improved marketing functions).
- Opportunity for CoVEs to be connected via ENE on current and future developments to EU tools and development and processes of (international) self-assessments and CEP awards/labelling (etc.).

➤ **A way forward to develop policy learning for VET Excellence and to support CoVE's mission: the need to use self-assessment tools and improve evidence-based development at national and international level.**

ENE is committed to leading the way on international policy learning facilitation for Vocational Excellence, thus helping CoVE operations worldwide. This will be done by prioritizing ENE CoVE members' needs, whilst taking into consideration international CoVE developmental trends and key drivers for building capacity and filling knowledge gaps.

This will continue at least until the end of 2025 through four central thematic partnerships: Social Inclusion and Equity (ENE SISI); CoVEs supporting the agenda on twin transition - digitalization of teaching and learning and green responses to excellence - ENE DIGI & GRETA - plus the entrepreneurial role of CoVES (ENE ENTRECoVEs). ENE is building strong synergies to achieve working outcomes, emerging from ETF-DG Employment work aimed at strengthening the international dimension of CoVE. This will benefit present and future members of ENE CoVEs. Actions specifically aimed at Sub-Saharan African CoVEs are also in the pipeline, as well as engagement of CoVEs with a sectoral focus.

ENE CoVE experience identifies the ENE self-assessment tool as a valuable element of the framework. It supports internal CoVE working processes, bringing clarity to VET institutions -VET providers - regarding their strengths, weaknesses, and areas of potential improvement. The added value of self-assessment is seen as a continuous development, in a holistic approach to collecting the anamnesis of VET providers.

All in all, ENESAT is an inspirational tool which complements existing quality assurance mechanisms at both national/local and provider level. ENSAT can be an insightful framework to inspire policy research, dialogue and advice on VET Excellence and to highlight ways of supporting CoVE development at different local, country-based, and international governance levels.

However, ENE experience also tells us that, in spite of CoVEs being highly appreciative of very useful self-assessment tools, these have yet to be widely implemented at the provider level. Nor have they been introduced as key referential tools by policy shapers on a national level. In this respect, ETF will continue - via ENE and EC cooperation - to invest in raising awareness and developing expertise to support the creation of self-assessment tools for underpinning VET Excellence worldwide.

Last but not least, this is connected to ENE experience in identifying a huge gap with regard to evidence-based tools (e.g., data/statistics, qualitative information) which support CoVE sharing practices in shaping VET Excellence policies at a national level.

There are numerous additional challenges linked to ENE project capacity, for example, how to expand the ENE network whilst continuing to pay back ENE members - and fulfilling their expectations on ENE services provision (tailored support on specific sub-thematic areas, organization of on-site study visits, individual reporting on CoVE self-assessment diagnosis, tailored advisory support structures for international projects, etc.).

In this respect, ENE faces the considerable challenge of transforming policy learning experience into policy advice function. This would mean, for example, engaging policymakers in policy dialogue to target discussions on how to integrate ENE CoVE lessons learned into VET policy reforms in order to shape relevant Vocational Excellence policies.

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