

Better Together

An insight into the cooperation and initiatives within the European Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and their Community of Practice (CoP)

**Ensuring that today's talent has
the skills to solve tomorrow's problems**

1. Preface

Developments in modern society move forward fast. They are complex and multifaceted, and require innovative and collaborative solutions.

To keep up with these global challenges we are facing, it is essential that the triple helix functions well: public organisations (like educational institutions), private organisations (like businesses, companies, industries, etc.) and governmental organisations need to work together to develop sustainable, equitable, and resilient solutions.

In order to make the green and digital transitions a success that works in an inclusive manner, we need educated and skilled professionals. Therefore, we need to improve our educational systems. We need to learn how to nurture talent in vocational education and professional training. We need to learn how we can create and adapt the curricula of VET and professional education, and how to implement our new knowledge in the day-to-day practice of Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs), companies, industries, governmental organisations, NGOs, and more. We need to learn how to use our full potential, and how to empower each other.



Total CoVE: 38

Total partners: 894

Paolo Nardi, Executive Director EfVET and public relations manager of the GIVE project: *‘We need to invite each other to meet, invite each other to share. Not just our best practices and successes, but also our problems and challenges. That way we will not only see that there are more solutions to our problems, but also that we could ask different questions.’*

Pieter Moerman, director Katapult, the Netherlands: *‘And right now, there are some major themes to focus on, like the energy transition, climate effects, sustainability, ageing workforce and society, inclusivity, circularity, and the ongoing digitalization. In order to create and maintain a green, resilient, sustainable, smart and more inclusive world.’*

This is exactly what the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) aim for, within their varying fields of expertise. By facilitating the cooperation between public and private partners, as well as NGOs and governmental organisations, together they find ways to improve vocational training, tailoring to the needs of organizations, SMEs and of society. That way, CoVEs help to build a more skilled, adaptable, and inclusive workforce, capable of meeting the demands of a rapidly changing world.

We, at the Community of Practice of the CoVEs, are excited and proud, since our international network of public-private cooperations is growing so steadily. This report gives insights into the wonderful international cooperations and initiatives that are taking place as we speak, and aims to provide some input on possibilities for improving the impact of the Centres of Vocational Excellence even further.



This overview study is, of course, a snapshot in time. The existing CoVEs keep developing themselves. Some are actively looking for new partners to enlarge their network, and the impact they make on various levels increases over time.

At the moment this report was written, there were 38 CoVEs. To see the up to date network of all CoVEs, [we created an overview \(map\) of all CoVEs](#).

We hope you find inspiration in our examples as you read this publication, together we can ensure that today's talent is equipped with the right skills to create a great tomorrow.

2. Let us introduce the CoVEs: Centres of Vocational Excellence

What are they?

CoVE stands for [Center of Vocational Excellence](#). This is a European initiative, funded by the Erasmus+ programme, aimed at enhancing the quality and innovation of vocational education and training (VET). CoVEs are designed to bring together VET providers, businesses, social partners, and other stakeholders in a particular industry or sector. The goals of CoVEs are to improve the quality of VET programs, to promote innovation and excellence, and to enhance the competitiveness of the industry or sector. The CoVEs operate at a regional level, but also facilitate connections among European regions and beyond, enabling the sharing of knowledge and effective solutions to ensure the collective benefit of European society. Click on the video below for a more extensive and illustrative explanation of CoVEs.



CoVEs are typically established around a specific occupational area or industry sector, such as healthcare, engineering, or tourism, or around a transversal topic like inclusion or green skills. They are expected to provide high-quality training and education that closely align with the needs of employers and the labor market. CoVEs are also expected to foster innovation and research in their respective fields, by collaborating with research institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders.

CoVEs ensure the bottom-up development of an adaptable curriculum, aiming for high quality skills and competences. This, in turn, should result in the creation of quality jobs and careers that meet the requirements of an innovative, inclusive and sustainable economy, while supporting the green and digital transitions.



Center of Vocational Excellence: more than the sum of its parts

The Erasmus+ Centres of Vocational Excellence are international European public-private partnerships (or public-public partnerships) that include vocational education and training (VET) institutions, professional education institutions, as well as companies and other organisations operating in the private sector. They collaborate to ensure that today's talent has the skills to solve tomorrow's problems.

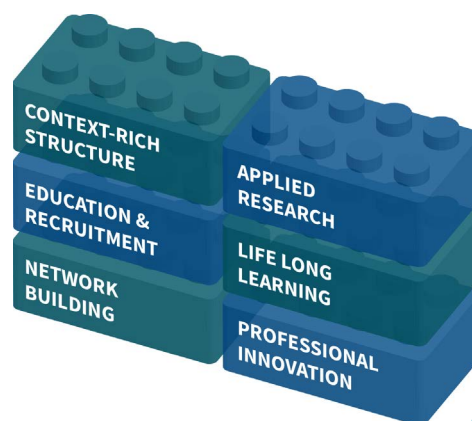
They share and combine their expertise: not merely accumulating it, but harnessing it to create fresh knowledge and discover innovative approaches to tackle nowadays challenges.

The expertise comes from its partners. People who are willing to invest their time into the CoVEs. People who are committed to improve our world and brighten our future. People who are sharing, transferring, formalizing, and multiplying their knowledge and expertise in order to let it become more than the sum of the parts.

How do the CoVEs work?

Despite sharing similar way of collaborating, CoVEs differ greatly in what they want to accomplish and how they want to reach their goals. This means that a CoVE can develop in many directions, focusing on a variety of activities. To illustrate both the similarities and differences between the projects, we think of them as being built with modular building blocks, like Lego.

Each CoVE consists of its own combination of [building blocks](#), all depending on the direction the CoVE wants to go. Experience has shown that different combinations of building blocks lead to different & predictable outcomes based on the combination of elements the partners focus on. For example, developing and sustaining innovative forms of education requires curriculum innovation. A context-rich infrastructure, professional innovation, and education innovation & recruitment are required for developing successful lifelong learning programs. For examples of how the building blocks are used in the Netherlands, [check out the video](#).



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How are the CoVEs linked to each other?

The project leaders of all Erasmus+ Centres of Vocational Excellence have joined forces in the [CoVE Community of Practice](#). In this community the project leaders share experiences, inspire each other and jointly try to find solutions for common issues they encounter while implementing the Centres of Vocational Excellence. By doing so, the project leaders are supporting each other and no one has to reinvent the wheel. The CoVE Community of Practice is a bottom up, open source initiative by and for the CoVE project leaders and participation is voluntary. Furthermore, the Community of Practice is working closely together with other stakeholders and policy makers in the field of VET and higher education, such as Cedefop, the European Commission and the ENE network of the European Training Foundation.



And this movement is growing! In 2023 a group of 13 new CoVEs started their journey towards more educated and skilled professionals. This group consists of the following centres:



• AUTO-COVE 2.0

• H2Excellence

Meet the Centers of Vocational Excellence

The project leaders of all Erasmus+ CoVEs meet online on a monthly basis to share experiences and discuss questions and issues they are encountering. Once a year, we come together in person during the Forum on Vocational Excellence, joining a much larger gathering of professionals working on Vocational Excellence. This event offers the opportunity to see Vocational Excellence in practice within the hosting country, make new connections among the CoVEs while simultaneously informing all interested stakeholders on the latest developments in VET.

The first edition of the Forum gathered over 300 people in San Sebastian. If you are interested in what was discussed, check out www.copcovers.eu/forum2022 for videos, presentations, Mentimeter results and summaries in cartoon form.

On the 25th and 26th of September, 2023, the Forum on Vocational Excellence took place in Amsterdam. Fellow practitioners and experts working on Vocational Excellence got the chance to meet, network and learn from each other. On top of that, experiences and ideas were shared during site visits at Dutch public private partnerships in VET. For the aftermovies, [click here](#).



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3. CoVEs in facts and figures

CoVEs are international public-private partnerships. This means that they include partners coming from the public sector, like institutions for VET and professional training, as well as partners coming from the private sector, like SMEs, industry and more. CoVEs bring together a wide range of local, regional and national partners from different countries, including but not limited to: initial and continuing VET providers, universities of applied sciences and polytechnics, research institutions, companies, chambers, social partners, social enterprises, national and regional authorities, development agencies, employment services, and social inclusion organisations.



Partners

The CoVE consortia consist of different types of partners. On average, each CoVE consists of 25 partners. Within these partners, there are on average 9 institutions of VET education and professional training, 15 industry partners, 2 governmental organisations and 2 NGOs cooperating.

Almost all EU countries are represented

Data of CoVEs up to 2022 shows that Spain (116 partners), Italy (88 partners), Germany (72 partners), Greece (65 partners), the Netherlands (58 partners) and Finland (50 partners) are most presented.

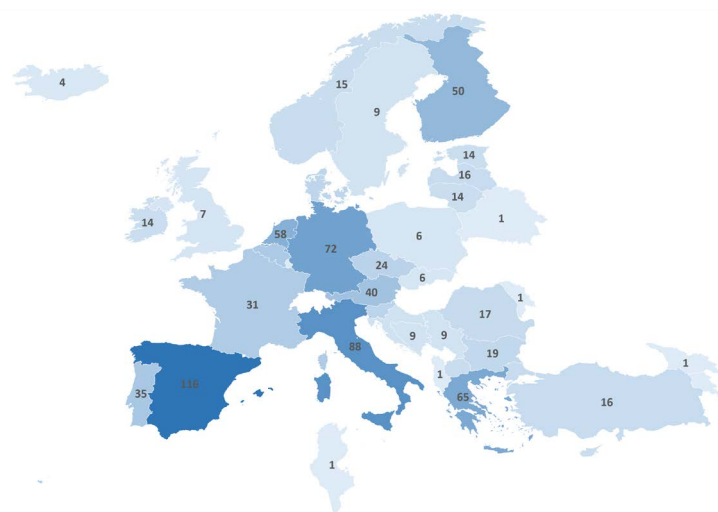
The target groups that the CoVEs aim to work with and for, are mainly companies, teachers and students. Governments, pre-VET students and ‘other’ stakeholders are also mentioned, but less frequently.

The impact of the Erasmus+ CoVE program goes beyond the abovementioned statistics. Annually a call is published for new CoVE projects and annually, this call is **significantly oversubscribed**, as the following graph shows. This means there is a lot of enthusiasm and potential to innovate Europe’s VET systems. Luckily, more CoVE grants as well as national grants become available over time.

Impact: Finding solutions together

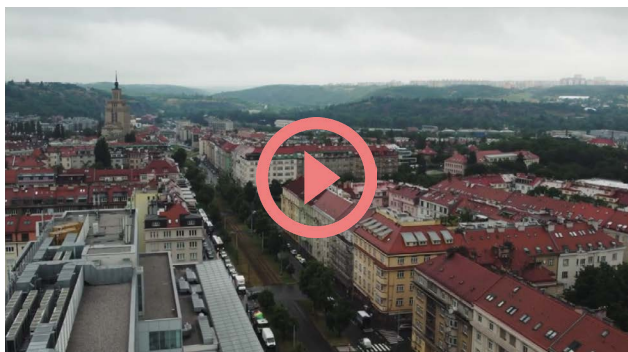
Besides the number of students, teachers and companies that have been reached, another important outcome of the CoVEs is international network building. This happens mainly through transnational project meetings, where partners of the CoVE meet to discuss project progress and to share information, expertise and perspectives. During these meetings it becomes explicitly clear that a CoVE is more than just a project; that it asks investments of time, expertise and commitment. A CoVE is more than the sum of its parts, and more than the sum of its partner organisations.

By sharing successes, questions, problems, challenges, solutions, procedures and outcomes, the various partners involved experience and learn about the many routes leading to Rome, and next to that, that there are more great destinations next to Rome.



By building on the relationships between the participants, trust is also built – leading to better communication, sharing, dissemination, mutual help, and (peer)learning.

Together, CoVE partners can find truly new innovative ways to contribute to solving global challenges. In order to make that togetherness happen, people coming from (very) different backgrounds (coming from the various partners of the CoVEs), need to meet in person – and that's what the Transnational Project Meetings provide for. Click on the picture and video below to see get an idea of what Transnational Project Meetings are like.



Paolo: *'In my opinion, most impact is reached through the Transnational Project Meetings. There we meet, we experience that we are not alone, share our best successes and our problems, exchange ideas, and truly learn from one another. We don't only learn that there are several solutions to the same problem, we also learn that maybe we could ask new, different questions. And however the impact is not always measurable, we always include teachers, who are just... great multipliers.'*

Impact: Bringing together the skills Ecosystem

We are facing major societal challenges, such as the energy transition. To address these challenges, we need as many skilled workers as possible. At the same time, the amount of working people in Europe is decreasing. CoVEs play a vital role in addressing these societal challenges by contributing to regional skills ecosystems. They modify VET curricula to ensure that their students acquire skills necessary for enterprises, SMEs, businesses and other organisations.

Imagine a world without these skilled professionals. We would have no bakers to provide bread, installation technicians to set up solar panels, or carpenters to craft furniture. Therefore, we need to all bring together the skills ecosystem. Click on the video to see some illustrative examples of how schools and industry are working together for the future of Europe's blue economy.



Prof. Henning Klaffke, closely involved in AIRinVET: *'let students be proud of their professional identity again: "I am baker / carpenter" ... etc... Because they should be – society needs them. Society should also be prouder of them. Students are the society.'*

Some CoVEs, like the [Allview](#) and [DIHUB project](#) created digital platforms, bringing together course offers, vacancies, the latest information in the sector and additional services from VET providers for companies. In Finland, for example, students helped to implement a chatbot function in the website of a small sized company selling bakery products.

Impact: Contributing to the SDGs

The CoVEs are actively contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Quality education is by far the most common example of this, with 16 CoVEs citing this as a goal.

Industry, innovation & infrastructure also received significant interest (11 CoVEs). Other Sustainable Development Goals that CoVEs contribute to are shown below. Logically, as the CoVEs are mostly focused on their regional ecosystem and stakeholders, the goals with the most interest are the ones concerning the closer surroundings of the CoVEs.



Impact: Offering students unique opportunities

Through the CoVEs, employers and VET providers are able to offer students unique opportunities for getting involved in their future workfield, while still studying. Work based learning and internships are seen in many CoVEs, but new activities are always being developed.

On Malta, the Energy and Water Agency, MCAST and University of Malta organized a hackathon 'Connecting the drops', together with all water related companies and agencies on Malta. Students from VET and higher education worked together on finding solutions to save rainwater to make Malta greener, thus addressing the heat island effect Malta is suffering from. For many students, it was the first time to work together with fellow students from other education levels and a first time to work with this challenge based education method.

In multiple CoVEs international exchange weeks are organized, for instance by the Platform of Vocational Excellence Water and the European Platform for Urban Greening. During these weeks, students work in multinational teams on societal challenges, provided by the government and company partners in the CoVEs. It gives students the opportunity to work with experts from the field, visit actual work sites and work on their social and professional skills at the same time. These weeks are challenge based and shorter than regular international exchanges. This gives students, who otherwise would be struggling to partake in an international experience, an opportunity to go abroad.

Impact: driving innovation

As mentioned in the introduction, a CoVE is about more than just educational collaboration between its partners. The needs analysis from the various CoVEs shows that there is a strong need for innovation and applied research in many regions, especially among small and medium sized companies that do not have large R&D departments. The collaboration between VET schools, universities, companies and regional governments in innovation is therefore invaluable. This innovation and research comes in many shapes and forms, check out the two videos below to learn more.



4. CoVEs in progress

Since most CoVEs are halfway through their project period, we will focus on the progress they made and the expectations for the remaining project years.

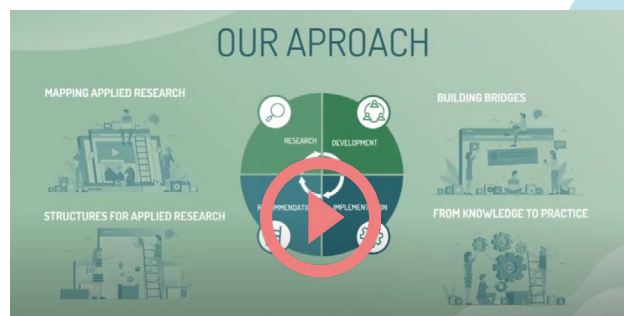
Follow up and synergies

Most CoVEs expressed confidence that their network would persist after the funding has finished. However, achieving sustainability depends on their capability to organize activities, to maintain a project management framework and attain financial self-sufficiency. To work toward this goal, various projects have already joined forces to establish spin-off initiatives that extend the work of the CoVEs. The [Challenger project](#), [AIR in VET](#) and [BARCOVE project](#) focus on the role of VET in applied research and innovation for instance, while the [Greenveu](#) project was created to address labour market shortages in the green sector, by researching the drivers for students to choose a green career. All these projects are also financed by the Erasmus+ Programme "Forward-looking projects".

Furthermore, many EU member states have national CoVE-like initiatives, like the [Campus de Metiers et Qualifications](#) in France. Some are also creating such schemes based on the European Commission Recommendation for the Resilience and Recovery Fund. Examples of this have been seen in the Polish and Spanish national governments.

Benefits from the CoVEs

When we're talking about the benefits from the CoVEs, we can look at different perspectives. For **society** it means a way to respond to the big challenges of our time, like the green transition, further steps in digitalization and to make sure we'll create an inclusive society. At first glance, these may seem like separate topics. But in fact, they are interdependent: they cannot go without one another if we want to handle challenges of today in a sustainable, feasible way.



Slavka: *'micro electronics are a necessity for the green and digital transition'*

For **VET schools**, participating in a CoVE means an opportunity to improve curricula by bringing them up to date, and to create life long learning possibilities for their own staff as well as the working force of regional industries. Linked to this are the extra opportunities the CoVEs bring for **students**. As with the international network that comes with a CoVE, it brings extra opportunities to go abroad or do an internship. This mobility broadens their horizon, changes their perspective and provides an enriching personal and professional experience.

The most common drivers for **private partners** to participate in CoVEs are the access to new knowledge and innovations. Furthermore, private partners participate to recruit new, well-trained employees.

For **governments**, the CoVEs are an important driver for innovation in their national VET systems. For example, thanks to the collaboration between companies, schools, government and NGOs in Romania in the European Platform for Urban Greening, the profession of gardener (much needed to keep our cities green and liveable in times of climate change), has been added to the national occupation code in Romania.

Perhaps most importantly, are the shared collective gains: society as a whole profits from the CoVEs in a mutually beneficial way. Learning (again), improving, having a better understanding of each other, innovating and making society a better place are all a part of the CoVE approach. The CoVE partners know this, breath this and are committed to this.

5. CoVE key elements and the next step

To conclude, we would like to highlight the key elements in starting a CoVE and give some recommendations on how to consolidate and enlarge the impact of the CoVEs.

Start!

At the start of CoVE collaboration, we encourage people to not keep on discussing all the details of the CoVE over and over. Time has told us that it works best to just make a start instead. Start with some smaller projects or activities, so that partners get a good feel what participating in a CoVE is like. From there, people will start to form relations and get new ideas for further goals and activities. Furthermore, the early successes form a catalyst for further collaboration.

Robust networks

The network of the CoVE is important: the amount of partners and stakeholders needs to be balanced. If there are too few, there might not be sufficient expertise on board. If there are too many full partners, on the other hand, communication becomes more difficult and decision taking processes slow down too much. Efficient and transparent communication is important, as well as personal contact between the partners: the better the relations between the people involved, the easier and more effective the process of mutual learning and entering creative and innovative processes will be.

Empower company partners and create ownership

Empower the company partners and labour market representatives. To increase the focus on the entrepreneur, it is essential to focus on their context, needs and making an impact rather than on administrative issues. By doing so, you will create ownership from all partners.

Additionally, letting industry partners provide a set of measures for educational support, such as having mentors in the company or creating the learning objectives for interns, will help to improve the quality of VET.

Sustainability

To ensure a CoVE keeps existing after the funding period ends, it is important to think about ways to create financial sustainability. This challenge should be addressed well before the end of the funding period. It is helpful for the partners of the CoVE to create different scenarios together, to explore different paths toward sustainable CoVEs.

It is all about creating a bigger pie

When bringing together stakeholders together in a CoVE, there can be conflicts of interest. For instance, because schools or companies are (perceived) competitors. In our experience, this is all a matter of perspective, since the focus of the work in CoVEs should not be on increasing the size of the slice of pie of each individual partner, but on enlarging the pie as a whole by working together.

Policies

Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) play an important role in improving the quality of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. However, to enlarge their impact, we have several suggestions to provide more flexibility, autonomy, and independence to CoVEs, as well as to promote collaboration between the world of work and VET centers.



Additional funding

Investing in existing CoVEs and allowing them to scale up. It takes time to establish a CoVE and once CoVEs have reached a geographical, sectoral, or thematic coverage, it is useful to invest in them to scale up in terms of partners, geographical coverage and individuals included in their activities. To do so, an **upscaling subsidy** for CoVEs, next to the current start-up funding, would have a great impact. This would also allow new partners, that in the current situation might consider starting a new CoVE, to join an existing one, so throughout Europe there will be 1 network of CoVEs per theme or sector, rather than multiple.

Furthermore, when looking at the number of high quality applications that get rejected because of the limited number of grants, it would be recommendable to make **more grants available** each year. The building of consortia and developing these high quality applications create a lot of energy among the stakeholders involved and it would be a shame not to capitalize on this energy by making the biggest impact possible in Vocational Excellence.

Thirdly, through the CoVEs many new innovations are developed, for instance the role of VET in innovation and applied research. In 2021, the European Commission launched a Forward Looking Project Call, specifically aimed at applied research in VET to stimulate this type of activity. We recommend that the Commission and other authorities continue to launch these kind of specific additional calls, since this kind of funding is a great accelerator for activities, based on the needs of the economy and society across Europe and help the CoVEs to become the long lasting movements in their skills ecosystems

Increase flexibility

Earlier on, we stated the importance to focus the energy on making a start. The same goes for the type of work you want to put energy in with a CoVE. When bringing together a group of people from different organisations, you want to be able to focus on activities that really make the impact, reaching students, teachers and people on the working floor.

Besides this, current CoVEs stressed the importance of flexibility in their program design. Since the CoVEs are working in a highly dynamic environment, it is important for an effective program to be able to adapt to changing circumstances, especially since the programs are running for four years.

Development of common understanding

Clarifying the meaning of CoVE: For many participants, the actual meaning of a CoVE remains unclear. It is sometimes understood as excellent education for the happy few, whereas the CoVEs clearly aim to create good education for all, being both inclusive and excellent.

A similar confusion regularly surfaces on what CoVEs are doing: it often takes quite some effort to explain this to stakeholders and potential partners. The focus seems to be on the educational activities that VET is traditionally associated with, whereas there are valuable additional roles, for instance in innovation and applied research where the CoVEs play an important role

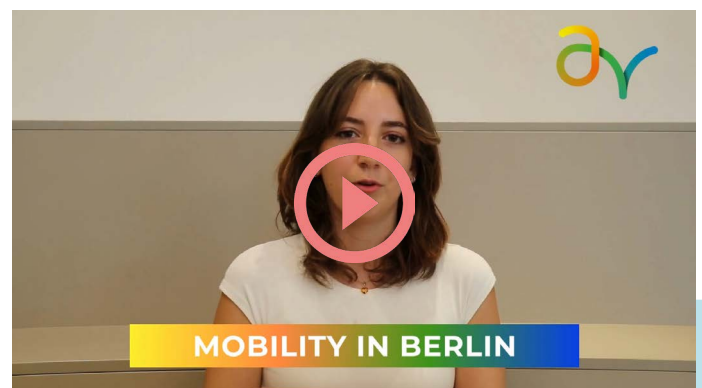
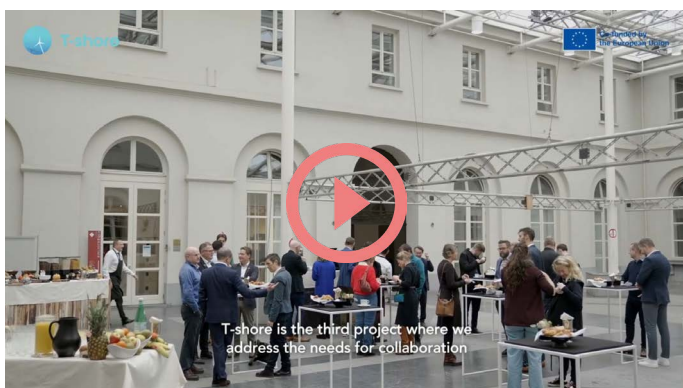
On the EU level, the development of a common understanding, like definitions, forms and criteria for both a CoVE and a network/platform of CoVEs is essential for the understanding of the role and impact of CoVEs. The work of Cedefop and ETF is therefore much appreciated, especially if the practical implementation and experience of the CoVEs are taken into perspective. The good practices should be identified, and additional funding programs for up scaling across Europe would make a big impact. Additionally, providing support for national and regional authorities to develop mechanisms for continuous support of successful CoVE initiatives and creating synergies with national initiatives are essential in making CoVEs financially sustainable and moving beyond the project phase, becoming true movements working on the much need skilled workforce of the future.

5. Inspiration

About CoVEs



Impressions



Colofon

About this publication:

This publication was compiled based on information from CoVE's (individual and CoP meetings), EACEA and all others from the CoVE community.

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