

Strengthening Centres of Vocational Excellence in the next Erasmus+ programme

A Strategic Investment in Europe's Skills, Competitiveness and Resilience

Submitted by:

A coalition of Dutch VET providers, Universities of Applied Sciences, employers' organisations, and regional innovation ecosystems



Summary

Europe is facing a defining moment for its future. Re-industrialisation, the green and digital transitions, geopolitical instability and demographic change require Europe to strengthen its own capacity to produce, maintain and innovate. Strategic autonomy and security of supply are no longer abstract ambitions - they depend on people with the right skills.

Skilled technicians, operators, craft professionals, digital specialists and care workers are essential to deliver Europe's energy systems, manufacturing capacity, defense readiness, digital infrastructure and social services.

Addressing these challenges requires bold, strategic investment in skills ecosystems, innovation capacity, and cross-border cooperation. These are the foundations of Europe's long-term competitiveness and social cohesion.

As Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs¹) have proven to be an effective instrument at Europe's disposal, we emphasize our ambition and willingness to contribute to Europe's challenges. Funded under the Erasmus+ programme, they bring together vocational education and training (VET) institutions, higher education institutions, businesses, social partners, research institutes, and public authorities. These sustainable public-private partnerships deliver measurable results: accelerated skills development, innovation, and inclusive regional growth.

The current proposal for the Erasmus+ programme falls short of enabling CoVEs and the University Alliances to realize their full ambitions. It fails to adequately support the strategic positioning, provide incentives for long-term funding certainty, and scalability that they require. Without corrective action, the EU risks losing the proven gains. It would be abandoning a highly effective model at the moment its expansion is most needed.

Therefore we call for the following:

- **Increase the Erasmus+ budget to €60 billion in the next MFF**
- **Embed CoVEs recognition in article 7 of the Erasmus+ regulation**
- **Introduce long-term investment pathways in article 6 of the Erasmus+ regulation**
- **Include a clear definition of CoVEs in article 2 of the Erasmus+ regulation**
- **Enable scalability through complementary funding by the ECF**
- **Improve SME accessibility**
- **Shift evaluation towards Ecosystem Impact**
- **Connect the CoVEs systematically into other programmes, such as the ECF (addressing skills), ESF+, NRPP and Horizon.**
- **Allocate funding to the Community of Practice of the CoVEs**

The Strategic Value of Centres of Vocational Excellence

CoVEs are structured, sustainable public-private partnerships. They connect VET institutions, universities of applied sciences, higher education institutions, companies including SMEs, social partners, public authorities, and research institutes. Together, these partners build regional and cross-border skills ecosystems.

Their work spans several interconnected areas. They deliver high-quality vocational education and training while also supporting innovation and applied research. At the same time, they facilitate technology transfer and SME development, promote entrepreneurship and start-up activity, and thereby strengthen regional competitiveness. Through these combined efforts, CoVEs position themselves at the heart of Europe's most pressing ambitions by advancing the Union of Skills, driving the green and digital transitions, and reinforcing SME competitiveness, regional cohesion, and democratic resilience.

For example, the EPLUG² CoVE shows how international collaboration can address skills shortages in the urban greening sector by developing specialised curricula and hands-on training in sustainable landscaping and biodiversity. By bringing together education providers, businesses, and local authorities, the project aligned VET programmes with industry needs while educating and upskilling student and adult learners as well as teachers. This resulted in 45 new or updated qualifications and the development of sector-relevant technical, green, digital, and transversal skills.

The PoVE Water Scale-Up³ CoVE demonstrates innovation in VET by integrating immersive technologies such as VR simulations, virtual laboratories, and interactive tools to teach water system and wastewater management. Through international activities like summer and winter schools, hackathons, and "Water Days," students and professionals collaborate across borders and gain practical experience in realistic learning environments.

By combining immersive technology, storytelling methodologies, and industry-involved curriculum design, the project enhances the attractiveness and quality of VET while preparing learners for real-world challenges in the water sector.

Their role is vital. For SMEs, they are engines of innovation and knowledge. For learners and workers, they bridge education and the labour market. For policy-makers, they provide living platforms to test and scale cross-border sectoral skills recognition. For the wider continent, they carry innovation and competitiveness outward.

The impact in the Netherlands alone is significant. Over 600 public-private partnerships⁴ are currently active. They reach 149,000 students annually and involve 39,000 companies. Some 18,000 teachers and researchers participate. Every Dutch VET institution and university of applied sciences is engaged. All economic sectors are covered.

Dutch engagement at European level is equally strong. Dutch organisations participate as partners or coordinators in 25 of the 69 CoVEs awarded under Erasmus+. These figures cover all CoVEs funded since the start of the initiative in 2019 up to those granted in 2025. This level of participation from the Netherlands reflects both real capacity and commitment.

Similar to the Dutch experience, national public-private partnership models for skills and innovation are emerging across Europe, including initiatives such as the French *Campus des Métiers et des Qualifications* and comparable skills ecosystems in countries such as Poland, Spain, Italy and Norway.

Insufficient strategic recognition and financial funding

The 2025 CoVE call demonstrated exceptional demand, with a success rate below 5%. While the amount of well-written proposal reflects strong commitment across Europe, the success rate also indicates a clear underfinancing of the instrument. The EU risks discouragement among stakeholders and CoVE ecosystems and there is a loss of innovation potential.

CoVEs operate in complex regional ecosystems that require continuity beyond short project cycles. In the current funding scheme, CoVEs receive project funding, but there is no scale-up or longterm vision for funding or valorisation. Without predictable funding, these unique public-private partnerships never reach their full potential. The private sector asks for a more long-term vision and public co-financing to develop functioning eco-systems.

The CoVEs have proven to be a instrument of relevance, working on the most pressing EU challenges. The next step must be to scale-up and unlock the unused potential.

Our recommendations

- **Increase the Erasmus+ budget to €60 billion in the next MFF**
A minimum of €60 billion euro's is needed for the next Erasmus+ programme. The programme needs to respond to the growing mobility demand. Besides, the programme is needed to strengthen quality education, support democratic resilience and support the goals of the Union of Skills. With a stable and increased budget, the Erasmus+ programme can live up to its promise and enable the development and scaling of CoVEs, without losing its ability to fund student mobility.
- **Embed recognition in article 7**
Article 7 of the Erasmus+ regulation should explicitly mention capacity-building actions, digital recognition of learning outcomes and facilitate transferable skills across borders. CoVEs provide a suitable framework to test and scale such initiatives.
- **Introduce long-term investment pathways**
Article 6 of the Erasmus+ regulation should not only mention the Centres of Vocational Excellence as example, but introduce long-term investment pathways to create clarity and certainty.
- **Include a clear definition of CoVEs in article 2**
The Erasmus+ regulation should include a formal definition⁵ in article 2 to define the CoVEs. A clear definition enhances legal certainty, accessibility, and coherence.
“Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) are a European flagship initiative to strengthen and develop Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Europe. CoVE projects are funded under Erasmus+ and aim to enhance the quality and innovation of VET. CoVEs are not just training institutions, but collaborative networks of local and international partners that respond to the evolving requirements of learners, businesses and communities”.
- **Enable scalability through complementary funding by the ECF**
Successful CoVEs should be able to scale via complementary funding streams. This is needed to provide the opportunities to outgrow the experimental phase and to enlarge and scale-up the public-private partnerships. The European Competitiveness Fund is a logical place in the European infrastructure to provide structured scale-up possibilities. This would clearly increase leverage, continuity and impact of the CoVEs.
- **Improve SME accessibility**
To strengthen SME participation, the Erasmus+ programme needs to simplify administrative procedures, reduce reporting burdens, introduce indirect funding mechanisms and provide onboarding grants similar to small-scale cooperation partnerships.
- **Shift evaluation towards ecosystem impact**
Evaluation frameworks should prioritise ecosystem-level outcomes, including skills development, innovation capacity, labour market outcomes, regional economic growth and social inclusion. Project based output indicators alone are insufficient to capture the systemic impact of the CoVEs.
- **Allocate funding to the Community of Practice of the CoVEs**
Project leaders of CoVEs collaborate in a voluntary Community of Practice to exchange experiences and jointly address common challenges. The initiative also engages with stakeholders such as Cedefop, the European Commission, and the ETF, and the importance of this collaboration is also recognised by the European Commission itself. Dedicated funding is essential to sustain the impact and long-term sustainability of the CoVEs.

New publications about the Erasmus+ CoVEs

- A promotional brochure for the CoVEs: [Unlocking Potential - Publications Office of the EU](#)
- An analytical report with findings and recommendations: [Advancing European Centres of Vocational Excellence \(CoVE\) - Publications Office of the EU](#)
- Annex with detailed info on 25 CoVEs (sample of projects selected for the above documents): [CoVE case studies - Publications Office of the EU](#)
- [New publications spotlight Erasmus+ Centres of Vocational Excellence - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion](#)