

Centres of Vocational Excellence

The initiative on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) defines a **bottom-up approach to excellence** where institutions for vocational education and training (VET) are capable of rapidly adapting skills provision to evolving economic and social needs. It aims to foster transnational collaborative platforms, which would be difficult for isolated member states to establish in the absence of EU incentives, technical support, and mutual learning opportunities.

The concept of vocational excellence that is proposed is characterised by a **learner-centred** holistic approach in which Vocational Education and Training:

- Is an integrative part of **skills ecosystems**, contributing to regional development, innovation, inclusion, and smart specialisation strategies;
- Is part of **knowledge triangles**, working closely with other education and training sectors, the scientific community, and business;
- Enables learners to acquire vocational and key competences through **high-quality provision** that is underpinned by quality assurance, builds innovative forms of partnerships with the world of work, and is supported by the continuous professional development of teaching and training staff, innovative and inclusive pedagogies, mobility and internationalisation strategies.

Objectives of the Action

This action supports the gradual establishment and development of European platforms of **Centres of Vocational Excellence**, contributing to regional development, innovation, and smart specialisation strategies as well as to international collaborative platforms.

Centres of Vocational Excellence will operate at two levels:

1. **At national level** in a given local context, by embedding CoVEs closely in the local innovation ecosystems, and connecting them at European level.
2. **At transnational level** through platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence to establish world-class reference points for vocational training by bringing together CoVEs that share:
 - a *common interest in specific sectors* (e.g. aeronautics, e-mobility, green and circular technologies, ICT, healthcare, etc.) or
 - *innovative approaches to tackle societal challenges* (e.g. climate change, resource depletion and scarcity, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, Sustainable Development Goals, integration of migrants, upskilling people with low qualification levels, etc.).

The platforms aim for "**upward convergence**" of VET excellence. They will be open for the involvement of countries with well-developed vocational excellence systems, as well as those in the process of developing similar approaches, aimed at exploring the full potential of VET institutions to play a proactive role in support of growth and innovation.

CoVEs are intended for organisations providing vocational education and training, at any EQF levels from 3 to 8, including the upper-secondary level, the post-secondary non-tertiary level as well as the tertiary level (e.g. Universities of applied sciences, Polytechnic institutes, etc.).

However, applications cannot include only activities that target learners at tertiary level; applications that focus on VET at tertiary level (EQF levels 6 to 8) must include at least one other VET qualification level between EQF levels 3 to 5, as well as a strong work-based learning component¹.

Eligibility criteria

In order to be eligible for an Erasmus grant, project proposals for Centres for Vocational Education must comply with the following criteria:

Who can apply?

Any participating organisation legally established in a Programme Country can be the applicant. This organisation applies on behalf of all participating organisations involved in the project.

What types of organisations are eligible to participate in the project?

Any public or private organisation active in the field of vocational education and training, or in the world of work and legally established in a Programme country or in any Partner Country (see section "Eligible Countries" in Part A of this Guide) can be involved as full partner, affiliated entity or associated partner.

For example, such organisations can be (non-exhaustive list):

- VET providers
- Companies, industry or sector representative organisations
- National/regional qualification authorities
- Research institutes
- Innovation agencies
- Regional development authorities

Number and profile of participating organisations

The partnership must include at least **8 full partners** from a minimum of **4 Erasmus+ Programme countries** (including at least 2 EU Member States) involving:

- a) at least 1 enterprise, industry or sector representative organisation, and
- b) at least 1 vocational education and training provider (at secondary and/or tertiary level).

Further composition of the partnership should reflect the specific nature of the proposal.

Duration of project

4 years

Where to apply?

To the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

Call ID: ERASMUS-EDU-2021-PEX-COVE.

When to apply?

Applicants have to submit their grant application by **7 September at 17:00:00 (Brussels time)**.

Applicant organisations will be assessed against the relevant exclusion and selection criteria. For more information please consult Part C of this Guide.

Setting up a project

Centres of Vocational Excellence are characterized by adopting a **systemic approach**. They are expected to go far beyond the simple provision of a quality vocational qualification. Features that characterise transnational cooperation platforms include a set of various activities grouped under the three clusters mentioned below:

1. **Teaching and learning** – including providing people with skills relevant to the labour market, in a lifelong learning continuum approach; developing innovative learner-centred teaching and learning methodologies including distance learning resources developing modular and learner-centred transnational VET learning provision (curricula and/or qualifications) thus facilitating the mobility (including virtual mobility) of learners and staff, as well as the recognition at regional and/or national levels.
2. **Cooperation and partnerships** – including contributing to the creation and dissemination of new knowledge in partnership with other stakeholders; and

establishing business-education partnerships for apprenticeships, internships, sharing of equipment, including resources for distance learning, exchanges of staff and teachers between companies and VET centres, etc.

- 3. Governance and funding** - including ensuring effective governance at all levels involving relevant stakeholders; and making full use of EU financial instruments and funds.

A non exhaustive list of activities corresponding to each cluster is presented in the Application Form.

The proposed activities should bring an added value and will have a direct impact on the achievement of the project results.

The project must include relevant deliverables linked to:

- at least 3 activities listed under Cluster 1 - Teaching and learning,
- at least 3 activities listed under Cluster 2 - Cooperation and partnership, and
- at least 2 activities listed under Cluster 3 - Governance and funding.

The applicant can include activities that are not listed under the three clusters above. These must demonstrate that they are particularly appropriate to meet the objectives of the call and identified needs, and must be considered and presented as part of a coherent set of activities.

CoVEs are not intended to build new VET institutions and infrastructure from scratch (although they may also do so), but instead to bring together a set of local/regional partners, such as initial and continuing VET providers, tertiary education institutions including universities of applied sciences and polytechnics, research institutions, companies, chambers, social partners, national and regional authorities and development agencies, public employment services, etc.

Projects are required to apply EU wide instruments and tools² whenever relevant.

Projects must include the design of a long-term action plan for the progressive roll-out of project deliverables after the project has finished. This plan shall be based on

sustained partnerships between education and training providers and key industry stakeholders at the appropriate level. It should include the identification of appropriate governance structures, as well as plans for scalability and financial sustainability. It should also ensure the appropriate visibility and wide dissemination of the work of the platforms, including at EU and national political level and include details on how the roll-out will be implemented at European, national and/or regional levels with relevant partners. The action plan shall also indicate how EU funding opportunities (e.g. European Structural Funds, European Fund for Strategic Investment, Erasmus+, COSME, sectoral programmes), and national and regional funding (as well as private funding), can support the roll-out of the project. This should take into account national and regional smart specialisation strategies.

Expected impact

The gradual establishment and development of European platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence is expected to increase the attractiveness of vocational education and training and to ensure that it is at the forefront of providing solutions to the challenges posed by rapidly changing skills needs.

By forming an essential part of the “knowledge triangle” – the close collaboration between businesses, education and research – and playing a fundamental role in providing skills to support innovation and smart specialisation, the Centres of Vocational Excellence are expected to ensure high quality skills and competences that lead to quality employment and career-long opportunities, which meet the needs of an innovative, inclusive and sustainable economy. This approach is expected to pave the way for VET to act within a more comprehensive and inclusive conceptualisation of skills provision, addressing innovation, pedagogy, social justice, life-long learning, transversal skills, organisational and continuing professional learning and community needs.

By being firmly anchored within regional/local contexts while at the same time operating at transnational level, the Centres of Vocational Excellence will form strong

and enduring partnerships between the VET community and the world of work at national level and across borders. They will thereby ensure the continuous relevance of skills provision and achieve results that would be difficult to obtain without knowledge sharing and sustained cooperation.

Through the wide dissemination of project outcomes at transnational, national and/or regional levels and the development of a long term action plan for the progressive roll out of project deliverables, taking national and regional smart specialisation strategies into account, individual projects are expected to engage relevant stakeholders within and outside the participating organisations and ensure a lasting impact after the project lifetime.

Award criteria

The following award criteria apply:

Relevance of the project (maximum score 35 points)

- **Link to policy:** the proposal establishes and develops a transnational cooperation platform of Centres of Vocational Excellence, aiming to foster VET excellence; it explains how it will contribute to achieve the goals of the policy priorities covered by the Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience³, as well as the Osnabrück Declaration⁴;
- **Consistency:** the extent to which the proposal is based on an adequate needs analysis; the goals are clearly defined, realistic and address issues relevant to the participating organisations and to the action;
- **Innovation:** the proposal considers state-of-the-art methods and techniques, and leads to innovative results and solutions for its field in general, or for the geographical context in which the project is implemented (e.g. content; outputs produced, working methods applied, organisations and persons involved or targeted);

- **Regional dimension:** the proposal demonstrates its integration and its contribution to regional development, innovation and smart specialisation strategies, based on the identification of local/regional needs and challenges;
- **Cooperation and partnerships:** the extent to which the proposal is suitable of realising a strong and enduring relationship at both local and transnational levels, between the VET community and businesses (can be represented by chambers or associations), in which interactions are reciprocal and mutually beneficial;
- **European added value:** the proposal clearly demonstrates the added value at the individual (learner and/or staff), institutional and systemic levels, generated through results that would be difficult to attain by the partners acting without European cooperation;
- **Internationalisation:** the proposal demonstrates its contribution to the international dimension of VET excellence, including the development of strategies to foster VET transnational mobility and sustainable partnerships;
- **Digital skills:** the extent to which the proposal foresees activities related to digital skills development (e.g. skills anticipation, innovative curricula and teaching methodologies, guidance, etc.) related to the development of digital skills;
- **Green skills:** the extent to which the proposal foresees activities (e.g. skills anticipation, innovative curricula and teaching methodologies, guidance, etc.) linked to the transition to a circular and greener economy;
- **Social dimension:** the proposal includes a horizontal concern throughout the various actions to address diversity and promote shared values, equality, including gender equality, and non-discrimination and social inclusion, including for people with special needs/fewer opportunities.

Quality of the project design and implementation (maximum score 25 points)

- **Coherence:** the overall project design ensures consistency between project objectives, activities and the budget proposed. The proposal presents a coherent and comprehensive set of appropriate activities and services to meet the identified needs and lead to the expected results. There are appropriate phases

for preparation, implementation, monitoring, exploitation, evaluation and dissemination;

- **Methodology:** the quality and feasibility of the methodology proposed and its appropriateness for producing the expected results;
- **Management:** solid management arrangements are foreseen. Timelines, organisation, tasks and responsibilities are well defined and realistic. The proposal allocates appropriate resources to each activity. A clear set of Key Performance Indicators, and a timeline for their assessment and achievement are defined;
- **Budget:** the budget provides for appropriate resources necessary for success, it is neither overestimated nor underestimated;
- **Work plan:** quality and effectiveness of the work plan, including the extent to which the resources assigned to work packages are in line with their objectives and deliverables;
- **Financial and quality control:** control measures (continuous quality evaluation, peer reviews, benchmarking activities, etc.) and quality indicators ensure that the project implementation is of high quality and cost-efficient. Challenges/risks of the project are clearly identified and mitigating actions properly addressed. Expert review processes are planned as an integral part of the project. These processes include an independent external assessment at mid-term and at the end of the project;
- If the project includes **mobility activities** (for learners and/or staff):
- The quality of practical arrangements, management and support modalities;
 - The extent to which these activities are appropriate to the project's aims and involve the appropriate number of participants;
 - The quality of arrangements for the recognition and validation of participants' learning outcomes, in line with European transparency and recognition tools and principles.

Quality of the partnership and the cooperation arrangements (maximum score 20 points)

- **Configuration:** the project involves an appropriate mix of complementary

participating organisations with the necessary profile, competences, experience and expertise to successfully deliver all aspects of the project;

- **Upward convergence:** the extent to which the partnership brings together organisations active in the field of vocational education and training, or in the world of work, that are at different stages of development of vocational excellence approaches, and allows for a smooth and effective exchange of expertise and knowledge among those partners;
- **Geographical dimension:** the extent to which the partnership includes relevant partners from different geographical areas, as well as the extent to which the applicant has motivated the geographical composition of the partnership and demonstrated its relevance to the achievement of the objectives of the CoVEs; as well as the extent to which the partnership includes a wide and appropriate range of relevant actors at local and regional level;
- **Involvement of Partner Countries:** if applicable, the involvement of participating organisations from Partner Countries brings an essential added value to the project;
- **Commitment:** the coordinator shows high quality management, ability to coordinate transnational networks and leadership in complex environment; the distribution of responsibilities and tasks is clear, appropriate, and demonstrates the commitment and active contribution of all participating organisations in relation to their specific expertise and capacity;
- **Collaboration:** an effective mechanism is proposed to ensure a good coordination, decision-making and communication between the participating organisations, participants and any other relevant stakeholder.

Impact (maximum score 20 points)

- **Exploitation:** the proposal demonstrates how the outcomes of the project will be used by the partners and other stakeholders. It provides means to measure exploitation within project lifetime and after;
- **Dissemination:** the proposal provides a clear plan for the dissemination of results, and includes appropriate targets, activities, relevant timing, tools and channels to ensure that the results and benefits will be spread effectively to

stakeholders, policy makers, guidance professionals, enterprises, young learners, etc. within and after the project's lifetime; the proposal also indicates which partners will be responsible for dissemination;

- **Impact:** the proposal demonstrates the potential impact of the project:
 - On participants and participating organisations, during and after the project lifetime;
 - Outside the organisations and individuals directly participating in the project, at local, regional, national and/or European levels.
- The proposal includes measures as well as clearly defined targets and indicators to monitor progress and assess the expected impact (short- and long-term);
- **Sustainability:** the proposal explains how the CoVE will be rolled out and further developed. The proposal includes the design of a long-term action plan for the progressive roll-out of project deliverables after the project has finished. This plan shall be based on sustained partnerships between education and training providers and key industry stakeholders at the appropriate level. It should include the identification of appropriate governance structures, as well as plans for scalability and financial sustainability, including the identification of financial resources (European, national and private) to ensure that the results and benefits achieved will have a long-term sustainability.

To be considered for funding, applications must score at least **70 points** (out of 100 points in total), also taking into account the necessary minimum pass score for each of the four award criteria: minimum 18 points for the “relevance of the project” category; minimum 13 points for “quality of the project design and implementation” and 11 points for the categories of “quality of the partnership and the cooperation arrangements” and “impact”. In ex aequo cases, priority will be given to highest scores for “relevance of the project” and then “impact”.

As a general rule, and within the limits of existing national and European legal frameworks, results should be made available as **open educational resources** (OER) as well as on relevant professional, sectorial or competent authorities' platforms. The proposal will describe how data, materials, documents and audio-visual and social media activity produced will be made freely available and promoted through open

licences, and does not contain disproportionate limitations.

What are the funding rules?

This action follows a lump sum funding model. The amount of the single lump sum contribution will be determined for each grant based on the estimated budget of the action proposed by the applicant. The granting authority will fix the lump sum of each grant based on the proposal, evaluation result, funding rates and the maximum grant amount set in the call.

The maximum EU grant per project is 4 million euros.

How is the project lump sum determined?

Applicants must fill in a detailed budget table according to the application form, taking into account the following points:

1. The budget should be detailed as necessary by beneficiary/-ies and organized in coherent work packages (for example divided into 'project management', 'training', 'organization of events', 'mobility preparation and implementation', 'communication and dissemination', 'quality assurance', etc.);
2. The proposal must describe the activities covered by each work package;
3. Applicants must provide in their proposal a breakdown of the lump sum showing the share per work package (and, within each work package, the share assigned to each beneficiary and affiliated entity);
4. Costs described can cover staff costs, travel and subsistence costs, equipment costs and subcontracting as well as other costs (such as dissemination of information, publishing or translation).

Proposals will be evaluated according to the standard evaluation procedures with the help of internal and/or external experts. The experts will assess the quality of the proposals against the requirements defined in the call and the expected impact, quality

and efficiency of the action.

Following the proposal evaluation, the authorising officer will establish the amount of the lump sum, taking into account the findings of the assessment carried out. The lump sum value will be limited to a maximum of 80% of the estimated budget determined after evaluation.

The grant parameters (maximum grant amount, funding rate, total eligible costs, etc.) will be fixed in the Grant Agreement.

The project achievements will be evaluated on the outcomes completed. The funding scheme would allow putting focus on the outputs rather than the inputs, thereby placing emphasis on the quality and level of achievement of measurable objectives.

More details are described in the model Grant Agreement available in the Funding and Tender Opportunities Portal (FTOP).

1.

According to Cedefop, work-based learning refers to knowledge and skills acquired through carrying out - and reflecting on - tasks in a vocational context, either at the workplace [...] or in a VET institution. For IVET, according to the Commission report from 2013 (Work-based learning in Europe: Practices and Policy pointers), there are three forms of work-based learning: 1) alternance schemes or apprenticeships typically known as the "dual system", 2) work-based learning as school-based VET which includes on-the-job training periods in companies and 3) work-based learning integrated in a school-based programme, through on-site labs, workshops, kitchens, restaurants, junior or practice firms, simulations or real business/industry project assignments.

For all VET terminology including work-based learning, please use the official cedefop publication:

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications...>

2. Such as the EQF, EQAVET, Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships, Council Recommendation on key competences, etc.

3. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.20...

4. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/osnabrueck_declaration_eu2020.pdf