Vocational excellence: Global insights, local futures for TAFE Centres of Excellence

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Victorian Skills Authority Fellowship, 2026

International Specialised Skills Institute

Victorian Skills Authority

First Published 2026

Report by Melanie Williams
Typeset by Danielle Cull
Printed by Elgin Printing

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ISBN: 978-1-923561-01-4

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The Victorian Skills Authority works in partnership with the International Specialised Skills Institute by funding the VET International Practitioner Fellowships. The Fellowship program focuses on developing opportunities within the VET sector to assist in building an Education State in Victoria that produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage. In addition, the program is funded to support the priorities of Skills First, including developing capacity and capability, innovative training practices and increasing teacher quality within the VET sector as well as building industry capability and developing Victoria's current and future workforce.

Fellow's Acknowledgements

The Fellow would like to acknowledge the many people who contributed to the success of the Fellowship:

Melbourne

- Mr Nicholas Hunt
- Mr Mark Foxwell
- Ms Felicia Mariani
- Mr Craig Robertson
- Ms Anne-Marie Butt

International

- Mr Jose Manuel Galvin Arribas, European Training Foundation, Turin, Italy
- Ms Eve Price, ConCOVE, Auckland, New Zealand
- Mr Boudewijn Grievink, Katapult, Utrecht, The Netherlands
- Mr Juan Sebastian Cortes, Ministry of Education, Paris, France
- Mr Matthieu Merciecca, Ministry of Education, Paris, France
- Mr Joao Santos, formerly European Commission, Lisbon, Portugal
- Ms Mervi Jansson, Omnia Education Partnerships, Espoo, Finland
- Ms Marievi Gretsi and staff, TourX, Athens, Greece
- Ms Anastasia Pouliou, Cedefop, Thessaloniki, Greece

02

Executive Summary of Fellowship

A thriving future for Victoria's vocational education and training (VET) sector will depend on its ability to deliver not just skills, but excellence. Around the world, Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) show that VET can drive innovation, industry competitiveness, and community renewal. They are reshaping vocational education – from responding to workforce demand to partnering in regional growth and technological change. This Fellowship set out to bring those lessons home.

Background

Between April and June 2025, the Fellow—an experienced VET educator, researcher, and leader with a strong interest in translating international best practice into Australian improvement—engaged face-to-face and online with CoVE leaders, policy architects and support networks in Europe and New Zealand. Site visits, interviews, and document analysis investigated how CoVEs operate in their policy contexts, with AI-assisted tools supporting systematic analysis. The journey revealed practical models of how excellence is defined, nurtured, and sustained – and what it takes for VET systems to move beyond compliance towards transformation.

Victoria shares several gaps with the broader Australian VET sector—limited and poorly defined recognition of excellence, slow responsiveness to rapid change, and industry engagement that remains more aspirational than embedded. These are compounded in Victoria by fragile collaboration in a contested market and evaluation practices that rarely extend beyond compliance. The topic was chosen to fill these gaps in the policy-practice landscape and contribute evidence and insights into how Victoria and Australia more broadly, can strengthen VET by adapting proven international models.

The countries were selected for their mature approaches to vocational excellence: European nations with well-developed infrastructure supporting regional and transnational partnerships, and New Zealand, where CoVEs have operated for almost five years in a VET system similar to Australia's. These contexts offered breadth and depth of practice relevant to Australia.

Fellowship learnings

1. Defining Vocational Excellence for Australia

Excellence is not yet defined in Australia. International models show it is holistic, learner-centred, and ecosystemic, not simply high-quality training delivery. It is a multifaceted, evolving practice involving ecosystem governance, pedagogical innovation, applied research, industry value creation, and social inclusion. Without a shared definition, Australian implementation risks TAFE Centres of Excellence that are merely rebadged projects rather than vehicles for transformation.

2. Ecosystem governance as a critical enabler

The National Skills Agreement (NSA) requires Centres to partner with industry, universities, unions, governments, Jobs and Skills Councils, and other providers. This research shows that excellence emerges through trust-based, autonomous, and accountable co-governance ecosystems that move beyond transactional alliances toward enduring, mutually invested partnerships, where responsibility and outcomes are genuinely shared.

3. Culture and mindset change

A significant culture shift is required for Victorian TAFEs: from competing in a contested training market to collaborating—even with competitors—through trust-based ecosystems. Excellence means growing the whole market, not just market share, by delivering greater value to learners, industry, and communities, thereby making VET more attractive for all.

4. Embedding cross-cutting priorities into every function

Some NSA-referenced national priorities—such as gender equality, Closing the Gap, Net Zero transformation, and digital capability—cut across sectors. European models frame excellence as embedding sustainability, digitalisation, inclusion, and innovation across all core functions. Together, these approaches suggest a roadmap for Australia: rather than treating national priorities as add-ons, they can be woven into core operations.

5. Evaluation and continuous improvement

The NSA does not outline evaluation standards. International models demonstrate the importance of self-assessment, peer review, and long-term impact measures. European frameworks offer a contribution, ensuring success is judged not only on outputs (training numbers) but also on systemic outcomes (innovation, industry value, transformation).

6. Centres as strategic drivers of regional transformation

The NSA frames Centres of Excellence around national priorities but does not consider their regional role. International experience shows CoVEs, both despite and because of their transnational partnerships, become catalysts for regional renewal. This matters for Australia, where policy risks overlooking the place-based role of VET as a driver of inclusive growth. Alongside the top-down designation of Centres, room must also be left for bottom-up initiatives to ensure Centres are anchored in real sectoral and regional priorities. Thus, Centres should be embedded – not standalone institutions – connected to regional innovation ecosystems to position VET as a driver of innovation, resilience, and community benefit.

Impact

The Fellowship broadened personal horizons through travel, language development, and connection with heritage, while also expanding international networks and clarifying understandings of vocational excellence. It has influenced planning in the Fellow's organisation. As Victoria has not yet heavily invested in TAFE Centres of Excellence, it provides a timely evidence base for discussions about how Victoria can position its VET sector for the future.

Considerations and recommendations

The Fellowship highlights the need to:

- Develop a national definition of excellence, drawing on international models but tailored to Australian priorities.
- Encourage cultural change through leadership development, teacher professional development and frameworks that reward system uplift rather than competitive positioning.
- Ensure the cross-cutting national priorities are woven into all aspects of Centres' work, with transparent reporting and dedicated funding for projects that make them visible.
- Develop a national evaluation framework that combines quantitative and qualitative indicators, includes peer review, and encourages continuous improvement.
- Strengthen the regional focus of Centres by aligning them with regional development strategies, ensuring they contribute visibly to place-based transformation.
- Alongside national designation, allow flexibility for bottom-up innovation hubs to emerge and gain recognition as Centres of Excellence.
- Develop sustainability and succession plans that identify future funding streams, governance stability, and pathways to independence beyond initial government support.

These findings and considerations will be shared through professional networks, sector conferences, and publications. Further work is needed to develop an Australian framework for excellence that draws on international insights while respecting local policy and cultural contexts. The recommendations are intended to stimulate discussion and guide practical steps towards establishing TAFE Centres of Excellence in Victoria and more broadly, as well as guiding existing Centres towards long-term success.

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Fellowship Background

The establishment of TAFE Centres of Excellence (more commonly known internationally as Centres of Vocational Excellence or CoVEs) is an increasingly global response to drivers such as digitalisation and Industry 4.0, green sustainability, social inclusion and "smart specialisation", which are producing rapid changes in the world of work, and the consequent trend in global workforce development towards higher skills[1]. Smart specialisation is the EU's place-based approach for focusing innovation investment on a few selected priorities where the impact can be greatest. In this international context, restructuring public VET institutions has become a strategic priority for governments and national agencies. They are working with private entities to address the current and future demand for high-quality skills from employers, industries, and innovation ecosystems in national and regional labour markets[2].

Australia is doing likewise. According to the 2024 National Skills Agreement (NSA), the aims of Australian TAFE Centres of Excellence are to provide national leadership in education and training by enriching student learning, supporting industry needs, and enabling applied research. They are also intended to drive innovation in tertiary education—such as through higher apprenticeships in areas of high skills need—and foster organisational innovation and excellence in teaching and training. In doing so, they are to leverage local industry and university expertise and build strong partnerships with employers, unions, universities, governments, Jobs and Skills Councils, other training providers including the National TAFE Network, and TAFE Centres of Excellence working on the same national priority under the National Skills Agreement[3].

However, the Centre of Excellence initiative is still in a relatively early phase of development in Australia, especially in Victoria. What is meant by 'excellence' is undefined, the process for selecting and establishing TAFE Centres of Excellence lacks transparency, and measures of success are not yet forthcoming. As an existing specialist provider of education and training in foods, tourism, hospitality and events, the Fellow's employer, William Angliss Institute (WAI), is considering preparing a bid to become a Centre of Excellence. With little to guide this process, the aims of the Fellowship were therefore to investigate both the policy context and operations of CoVEs in international settings to make available learnings from these established models to inform WAI's deliberations and to guide Australian VET more broadly.

Complementary research in Victoria, commissioned by the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) and the

1 European Training Foundation, 2020. Centres of Vocational Excellence: An engine for vocational education and training development. centres_of_vocational_excellence.pdf (europa.eu)
2 Ibid.
3 Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. 2025. "TAFE Centres of Excellence." *Australian Government*. Last modified 23 May 2025. https://www.dewr.gov.au/national-skills-agreement/tafe-centres-excellence.

Victorian Skills Authority[4], examines Centres of Excellence models through a systematic literature review, focusing on their design, implementation, and alignment with the National Skills Agreement. This study proposes a conceptual framework to differentiate Centre of Excellence models based on funding purpose, recipients, activities, and determination processes, emphasising collaboration, innovation, and regional impact. While highlighting international examples like European CoVEs, it underscores the need for Australian TAFEs to prioritise partnerships and applied research to address national priorities such as net zero transitions and equity. These insights reinforce the potential for TAFE Centres of Excellence to drive systemic uplift, suggesting a national evaluation framework to measure vocational excellence across providers.

The scope of the Fellow's investigation included European and New Zealand CoVEs, for the most part with an emphasis on tourism and hospitality sectors because this aligns with WAI's focus. Research questions centred on:

- the purpose and role of CoVEs
- partnership and governance arrangements
- operations and funding
- curriculum, pedagogy and student outcomes
- industry and sectoral engagement, and
- evaluation and impact.

This report is directed towards Australian VET policymakers, TAFE Institutes, their partners, and practitioners who are already, or who may be interested in becoming, a TAFE Centre of Excellence—or indeed, any Australian VET provider contemplating adopting features and practices recognised as exemplifying excellence in vocational education and training. The Fellowship addresses a significant gap in background knowledge for Centres of Excellence and offers an opportunity to move beyond a 'make it up as you go' approach by learning from the experience of others further along the path.

Figure 1. Entrance to the European Training Foundation, Turin, Italy.

Methodology

Research questions were developed with input from members of WAI's Executive as well as personnel from the Victorian Skills Authority and Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions. The questions were forwarded to the convenor of the European Training Foundation's European Network for Excellence in Turin, Italy, who was known professionally to the Fellow. He provided guidance on which European CoVEs and policy makers would be best placed to respond to the questions and facilitated contact where required. As some questions related to the broader policy environment and some to the operations of CoVEs, interviewees were selected accordingly.

The data was gathered through eight in-person or online semi-structured interviews conducted

4 Pham, T., Corbett, J., Pham, L., & Allitt, B. (2024). Centres of Excellence Research Report: Research Insights Project. AVETRA & Victorian Skills Authority.

between April and June 2025, supplemented by an analysis of resources provided for the most part by the interviewees. European participants were located in Italy, The Netherlands, France, Portugal, Finland and Greece. A New Zealand CoVE was also included because New Zealand's VET landscape closely resembles Australia's own and CoVEs have been operating there for almost five years.

Permission was granted to record six of the interviews and Zoom was used to record and facilitate the production of automatic transcripts. Where it was not appropriate to record (during prolonged, multi-person discussion on site visits) notes were taken and fleshed out into a summary immediately after the interviews.

Taking the themes from the interview questions as the organising framework, ChatGPT was used to extract relevant data from the interview transcripts and summaries for each theme. This was enriched by a second pass of the data to identify relevant material not directly related to the interview themes that had emerged during the conversations. The whole was checked manually for accuracy and completeness, then written up with AI assistance.

Limitations

While this study sought to capture the diverse operating contexts of CoVEs through interviews with policymakers and network representatives who are privy to broader perspectives, its scope was necessarily constrained by the low number of cases possible within a small-scale study. In addition, the Fellow was aware of forthcoming research by the European Training Foundation into global models of CoVES [5], which has since been released, so did not seek to cover a broad or representative range of examples.

Within the research, government, institutional, and policy perspectives are well represented, but industry voices are notably absent. Despite requests prior to site visits, interviews with employer partners could not be secured. This gap limits understanding of how CoVEs are perceived by industry to create value for them – an element that is central to their legitimacy and long-term sustainability. In addition, as much of the evidence comes from policymakers and institutional leaders, it risks overemphasising formal structures and underrepresenting the lived experiences of teachers, learners, or community stakeholders.

Finally, the study necessarily interprets international models for an Australian audience. However, policy settings, governance structures, funding models, and labour market dynamics differ significantly, which may limit the direct applicability of some findings.

Terminology and acronyms

In this report, the term 'TAFE Centre of Excellence' or simply 'Centre' is used to refer to the Australian context, while Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) refers to international contexts, where this is the most commonly used term. However, not all entities that share the features normally associated with CoVEs are called such. For instance, in France they are called 'Les campus des métiers et des qualifications' (Campuses of Trades and Qualifications) but to all intents and purposes, they operate as CoVEs, are considered as such in Europe.

A number of terms are used throughout the report that have specific meanings in the European Union (EU) policy context. While each term is explained on its first use in the text, the definitions are repeated here for convenience:

Skills ecosystem – "a geographic cluster of organisations … employing manpower with advanced, specialised skills … that once started, generate a positive, mutually reinforcing dynamic that fuels ongoing knowledge creation and growth".[6]

5 European Training Foundation. 2025. *A Road to Excellence: International Networking on VET Excellence and Centres of Vocational Excellence for Co-Creating Skills Ecosystems.* Edited by J. Manuel Galvin Arribas. Turin: European Training Foundation. https://openspace.etf.europa.eu/resources/report-road-excellence-international-networking-vet-excellence-and-centres-vocational.

6 Finegold, David. "Creating SelfSustaining, HighSkill Ecosystems." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 60–81: 62.

Smart specialisation – the EU's place-based approach for focusing innovation investment on a few selected priorities where the impact can be greatest.

Upward convergence – raising VET quality across countries by linking partners at different maturity levels so that everyone moves upward together through structured knowledge exchange.

The following acronyms occur in the text:

AVETRA – Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association

CEDEFOP – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

CoVE – Centre of Vocational Excellence

DJSIR – Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions

ENE – European Network for Excellence

ENESAT – European Network for Excellence Self-assessment Tool

EQAVET – European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training

ETF – European Training Foundation

ETHAZI – (Basque collaborative challenge-based learning model)

EU – European Union

EVTA – European Vocational Training Association

HERDSA – Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia

ISATCOVE – International Self-assessment Tool for Centres of Vocational Excellence

JSCs – Jobs and Skills Councils

NGO – Non-government organisation

NSA – National Skills Agreement

RPL – Recognition of Prior Learning

SMEs – Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

VDC – VET Development Centre

VET – Vocational Education and Training

VTA – Victorian TAFE Association

WAI – William Angliss Institute

Professional biography

Having worked in the secondary school, adult community, vocational and higher education sectors, the Fellow has almost forty years' experience working and researching in education, much of it in VET. She holds several education qualifications, including a Master of Education by research and a PhD, and is a member of AVETRA and HERDSA. She was fortunate to gain her first ISS Institute VET International Practitioner Fellowship sponsored by the Victorian Government in 2018, to investigate international approaches to developing 21st-century skills. Her research in New Zealand and Europe focused on professional practice learning and collaborative challenge-based learning. Key outcomes from that Fellowship include: a research partnership with Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand, which led to an international conference co-presentation and the subsequent recruitment of the collaborator as Eminent Professor at WAI; a Memorandum of Understanding between WAI and the Basque Government; and, delayed by the pandemic, the introduction of the Basque ETHAZI method of collaborative challenge-based learning in selected programs at WAI, including training 14 teachers in the method. The Fellow has shared the findings of her Fellowship and follow-up research through presentations at two VTA networks, five conferences, a VET Development Centre (VDC) Thought Leaders event, an ISS Institute/

VDC Illuminate event, and she has published her Fellowship research in *Research Today magazine* [7] and the *International Journal of Training Research* [8] *in addition to the Fellowship report* [9]

Figure 2. Fellow writing up interview notes, Paris, France

7 Williams, Melanie. 2021. "The Pedagogy of Innovation: Collaborative Challenge-Based Learning." *Research Today* 27 (May): 2–5. https://avetra.org.au/data/Research_today_May_2021.pdf

8 Williams, Melanie. 2024. "Collaborative Challenge-Based Learning: A Case Study for Twenty-First Century Skills Development." *International Journal of Training Research*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2024.2385908.

9 Williams, Melanie. 2019. "*Developing twenty first century skills in VET*". https://www.issinstitute.org.au/fellowship-report.

04

Fellowship Learnings and Findings

The international policy context

Comparative studies of vocational education and training (VET) consistently highlight the diversity of governance, pedagogical traditions, and labour market relationships that shape national systems. One of the most comprehensive frameworks is the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training's (Cedefop) *50 Dimensions of VET* [10], which organises analysis across three overlapping perspectives: epistemological and pedagogical (knowledge and learning approaches), systemic (institutional and governance structures), and socio-economic (links with industry and labour markets). This framework does not prescribe a single model but instead emphasises the need to understand VET systems in their own contexts, recognising that policy transfer must be adapted rather than replicated. The framework provides a useful backdrop for the current study: it reinforces the importance of analysing CoVEs through multiple lenses, from teaching practice and institutional capacity to governance arrangements and industry alignment, and of adapting the findings for Australian conditions.

The European model of CoVEs is both a political and strategic response to major skills challenges facing the European Union (EU). From its inception, the initiative has been positioned not as an isolated project, but as a policy instrument launched through the Erasmus+ Partnerships for Excellence program as a model to catalyse systemic reform in VET. CoVEs have emerged where teaching traditions, system structures, and labour-market priorities intersect. This helps explain why national contexts produce varied approaches, from France's structured certification process to Germany's employer-driven system. Framing the evidence through these dimensions highlights that CoVEs are products of their broader VET ecologies, rather than stand-alone policy instruments.

10 Cedefop (2023). *The future of vocational education and training in Europe: 50 dimensions of vocational education and training: Cedefop's analytical framework for comparing VET.* Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper, No 92. http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/57908

Implementing vocational excellence approaches features prominently in the overall EU policy agenda for skills and for VET. The European Skills Agenda[11], the European Education Area[12], the Council of the European Union recommendation 20[13], and the Osnabrück Declaration[14] all include clear references to vocational excellence as a driving force for reforms in the VET sector[15]. The CoVE initiative responds directly to this policy priority, aiming to meet the needs of an innovative, inclusive, and sustainable economy.

As the *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025*[16] states:

This initiative introduces a European dimension to vocational excellence by supporting the implementation of EU VET policy and actions agreed with Member States, social partners and VET providers… CoVEs operate in a given local context, creating skills ecosystems for innovation, regional development and social inclusion while working with CoVEs in other countries through international collaborative networks… enabling VET institutions to rapidly adapt skills provision to evolving economic and social needs (p. 248).

As the European Commission's main architect of CoVEs explained at interview, the concept was shaped by an analysis of what was already working well in vocational education across Europe. In the early planning stages of Erasmus+, the Commission sought to move beyond piecemeal reforms by developing a more integrated initiative that could act as a "lighthouse" for vocational excellence.

Figure 3. European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium

Drawing on the work of theorists such as Finegold and Buchanan[17] and their concept of "high skills ecosystems,"—described by Finegold as "a geographic cluster of organisations … employing manpower with advanced, specialised skills … that once started, generate a positive, mutually reinforcing dynamic that fuels ongoing knowledge creation and growth"[18]— the Commission initiated a study of vocational systems across 28 member states. The study identified common features of excellence irrespective of national models. These included strong alignment between vocational education and regional economic strategies, robust and stable partnerships among education providers, employers, and other stakeholders, and an expanded role for VET institutions beyond issuing qualifications — including applied research, staff development, recognition of prior learning, and

11 European Commission. *European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience.* July 2020. Publications Office of the European Union. European Skills Agenda - European Commission

12 European Commission. *The European Education Area Explained.* European Education Area initiative, updated November 4, 2024. European Education Area explained - European Education Area

13 Council of the European Union. "Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on Vocational Education and Training (VET) for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience." *Official Journal of the European Union* C 417 (2 December 2020): 1–16. Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience 2020/C 417/01 - Publications Office of the EU

14 Ministers in Charge of Vocational Education and Training of the Member States, EU Candidate Countries, EEA Countries, European Social Partners, and the European Commission. *Osnabrück Declaration on Vocational Education and Training as an Enabler of Recovery and Just Transitions to Digital and Green Economies.* 30 November 2020. osnabrueck_declaration_eu2020.pdf

15 A list of further EU policy documents relevant to European VET can be found here: Document library - European Education Area

16 European Commission. 2025. *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, Version 2.* Brussels: European Commission. January 20, 2025. https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-01/erasmus-programme-guide-v2.2025_en.pdf

17 See for example:
- Buchanan, John, Pauline Anderson, Gail Power, Chris Warhurst, Ken Mayhew, David Finegold, and John Buchanan, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Skills and Training*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017
- Finegold, David. "Creating SelfSustaining, HighSkill Ecosystems." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 60–81.

18 Ibid. p.61.

adult upskilling. These insights informed the design of the CoVE model and helped shape the guiding principles underpinning the Erasmus+ Partners for Excellence funding framework.

Funding for CoVEs is available through annual competitive calls for applications for up to €4 million per project for a period of four years. The funding commenced in 2019 and is due to expire in 2027. The economic rationale for CoVEs is embedded in the EU's response to structural challenges — particularly the green and digital transitions, demographic shifts, and the need for innovation-driven growth. Thus, the intent is for the VET system to contribute to empowering people with the skills that are needed for the major green and digital transitions: it is seen as an innovation and development/growth imperative.

CoVEs therefore aim to ensure a very close link between VET provision and regional development or smart specialisation strategies, supported by strong partnerships and a broader role for VET institutions that includes applied research, teacher development, and adult upskilling. The *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025*[19] frames CoVEs as catalysts for both social inclusion and economic development:

They act as catalysts for local business development and innovation, by working closely with companies (in particular SMEs) on applied research projects… supporting entrepreneurial initiatives of their learners… The networks aim for 'upward convergence' of VET excellence… exploring the full potential of VET institutions to play a proactive role in support of growth and innovation (p.248).

The concept of "upward convergence" means raising VET quality across countries by linking partners at different maturity levels so that everyone moves upward together through structured knowledge exchange.

Implications for Australian VET

- Adapt principles, not structures: European CoVEs thrive on systemic alignment—policy, funding, and partnerships. Australia should replicate the ecosystem logic (integration with regional development, innovation, inclusion and an expanded role for VET providers) but ensure approaches are shaped by Australian conditions.
- Signal excellence as a long-term systemic goal, not a project-based initiative. This requires linking training to regional development, innovation strategies, and national priorities.
- Create structured mechanisms for sharing knowledge across regions and sectors so that high-performing Centres lift the whole system rather than operate as isolated beacons.

The establishment, purpose and role of CoVEs

Far from being merely high-performing providers, CoVEs are broadly conceived as part of an integrated skills ecosystem, bringing together partnerships including VET and higher education providers, research institutions, companies, chambers of commerce, social partners, social enterprises, local and regional authorities, and development agencies to rapidly adapt skills provision to economic and social needs, including the twin digital and green transitions. They link existing institutions into collaborative frameworks to deliver high-quality initial VET, upskilling, and reskilling for adults, while fostering innovation, driving regional development and promoting social inclusion[20].

The European Commission emphasises embedding CoVEs in smart specialisation strategies and regional innovation ecosystems, encouraging collaboration between advanced and less-developed centres to promote upward convergence towards excellence. The ambition is to diffuse innovation and good practice across the system, enhancing the quality and attractiveness of VET for all learners.

19 European Commission. 2025. *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, Version 2*. Brussels: European Commission. January 20, 2025. https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-01/erasmus-programme-guide-v2.2025_en.pdf

20 *Ibid.*

The European Commission's policy agency for VET, Cedefop, has been conducting ongoing research into six evolving VET scenarios[21]—pluralistic (characterised by diverse qualifications and learner choice), distinctive (employer-led with apprenticeships as a cornerstone), and special purpose (tailored for marginalised groups)—which demonstrates how these models are tested across European countries to inform policy and foster system-wide convergence to build systemic uplift. Similarly, in France, the approach ensures no college is left behind, with lead institutions tasked with upscaling regional providers to promote inclusive growth. While activity happens at a regional level, France nonetheless uses CoVEs to drive national curriculum innovation, especially in niche or emerging specialisations.

Under the Erasmus+ model, CoVEs must involve a transnational partnership of at least eight full partners from four program countries. Applicants must be legally established organisations active in VET or in the world of work. They must be based in EU Member States or third countries associated with the Erasmus+ program. Each of the four partner countries must contribute at least one VET provider and one employer or industry representative organisation to ensure a balanced representation of education and labour market stakeholders across participating nations. Only organisations from associated countries can serve as the coordinating partner. Third-country organisations not associated with the program may participate as associated partners but do not receive Erasmus+ funding directly unless otherwise eligible under specific EU instruments. Activities must span at least three of six areas: teaching and learning; cooperation and partnerships; governance and funding; innovation and applied research; quality assurance; and internationalisation[22].

The purpose of CoVEs is consistently framed in terms of systemic transformation. As one French interviewee explained, CoVEs aim to "respond to the skill challenges" of the green and digital transitions and to "accelerate the transformation of VET." They serve as mechanisms to align training provision with smart specialisation strategies and to foster strategic partnerships that support innovation and economic development.

Figure 4. Ministry of Education, Paris, France

This transformation imperative is echoed in New Zealand, where ConCOVE was established for the construction sector with a mandate, according to the interviewee, to "innovate and transform vocational education and training." Unlike traditional providers, ConCOVE does not deliver qualifications; rather, it focuses on identifying systemic issues, trialling new interventions, and ensuring that the voices of learners, employers, and underrepresented groups influence reform efforts. It has become a trusted source of policy-relevant research, highlighting system gaps while brokering pilot reforms, such as higher apprenticeships.

21 https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/future-vet
22 European Commission. 2025. *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, Version 2*. Brussels: European Commission. January 20, 2025. https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-01/erasmus-programme-guide-v2.2025_en.pdf

A distinctive feature of CoVEs is their ecosystemic role. Their effectiveness depends on trust-based partnerships and mutual learning. In the words of one French interviewee, campuses act as "bridges to both worlds"—education and industry—without aligning to private interests. Similarly, the Erasmus+ framework highlights CoVEs as embedded entities within regional innovation ecosystems, capable of flexibly adapting to changing skills demands.

In several jurisdictions, CoVEs also play a formal role in shaping policy. They advise public authorities on which training programs to expand or close, based on local regional labour market intelligence and stakeholder consultation. In New Zealand, this role includes "feeding back into the system" to inform future design and improve learner outcomes. The Erasmus+ community of practice model is intended to amplify this feedback loop, allowing CoVEs to influence reforms at both national and European levels.

Ultimately, CoVEs function as hubs of innovation, inclusion, and strategic foresight. As one interviewee noted, their value lies in "creating the future good practices," not just replicating the best of the past. Through this role, CoVEs are helping redefine vocational education as a dynamic, adaptive and system-shaping force across Europe and beyond.

Funding for CoVEs

Under Erasmus+ up to €4 million is available in a lump sum model for each project over a four-year period. Under this model, beneficiaries receive a fixed amount of funding to implement the full scope of their approved work plan. The grant covers all eligible costs—including staffing, curriculum development, stakeholder engagement, mobility, infrastructure, and evaluation—but does not require detailed reporting on individual cost items. Instead, accountability is based on the achievement of agreed deliverables as specified in the project's programs of work.

There are no prescriptive rules from the European Commission regarding how this lump sum should be divided among consortium partners. However, all beneficiaries are required to negotiate and sign a formal internal partnership agreement prior to project implementation. This agreement outlines the roles, responsibilities, and budget allocations for each partner, ensuring transparency and shared accountability. The coordinator of the consortium receives the full grant on behalf of the group and is responsible for distributing funds to other partners according to this agreement.

Project funds can be used flexibly across a range of activities, including curriculum co-design, micro-credential development, applied research, digital platform development, and joint communication or dissemination efforts. Where justified, they can also support infrastructure acquisition or rental – and not just for the VET partner. Although funded by the French Government rather than Erasmus+, one example was given of a CoVE in which a large regional employer partner bought a very expensive piece of equipment for their factory because the lack of it was inhibiting both the competitiveness of the region and the work-readiness of students who were not up to speed with the latest techniques.

Under Erasmus+, each project is structured into work packages, each with designated deliverables and budgeted costs. The lump sum is linked to the successful completion of these packages. Participating organisations must keep documentation to substantiate their performance and enable external monitoring or audits. Further, the outcomes of CoVE activities must be made available as open educational resources. Proposals must describe how materials will be made freely available and promoted through open licences[23].

Erasmus+ project proposals are required to include a long-term action plan that ensures sustainability beyond the funding period. This plan must outline the progressive roll-out of project deliverables and the continuation of partnerships once the initial grant has ended. It should also detail appropriate governance structures, strategies for scalability, and the identification of financial resources—whether

23 European Commission. 2025. *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, Version 2*. Brussels: European Commission. January 20, 2025. https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-01/erasmus-programme-guide-v2.2025_en.pdf

European, national, or private—to support the long-term viability of the results and benefits achieved[24]. While follow-on funding may be sought through subsequent Erasmus+ calls, it must support new activities rather than repeats or extensions of previously funded work.

It should be noted that Erasmus+ is not the only source of funding for CoVEs. For instance, the French system of campuses has been supported by the French government without EU funds, through coordination between four ministries: Education, Higher Education, Labour and Economy. Many CoVEs are sustained through a mix of public grants, private contributions (including donated equipment), entrepreneurial income, and in some non-EU cases, international aid[25].

In New Zealand, where the CoVE concept was adopted and adapted to national priorities in 2020, seed funding for two CoVEs was for a five-year period, which is due to expire in 2025. Thus, while public funding has been used initially to "ignite the system" and mobilise collaboration, the long-term sustainability of CoVEs is expected to be driven from within. At the time of the interviews, the search for ongoing funding as the initial four-year terms were drawing to a close for the European CoVEs was a significant preoccupation for several interviewees.

Figure 5. Iconic skyline view from the Ministry of Education offices, Paris, France

Differing models of CoVEs

The integration of CoVEs into Europe's VET landscape highlights significant national variation shaped by system traditions and governance. In Germany, employer-led dual training contrasts with France's state-coordinated model, where CoVEs are designated through a competitive label. Elsewhere, centres have emerged through government nomination or political designation. These differences show how CoVEs reflect national priorities—whether green transitions, digital upskilling, or broader reforms—and underline that implementation strategies must be adapted to context rather than applied as a one-size-fits-all model. While Erasmus+ funding has enabled their growth, the forms and functions of CoVEs ultimately depend on the interplay of top-down policy, grassroots initiative, and regional collaboration.

In France, CoVEs emerge from joint initiatives between regional and national authorities but must be grounded in strong grassroots proposals within priority sectors. Eleven labelling criteria govern both standard and "Excellence" campuses, ranging from formalised regional governance to sustainable financing, international engagement, and quality assurance through both self- and external evaluation. The five additional criteria relating specifically to excellence include the shared diagnosis of issues identified from a socio-economic analysis; identifying the scope of stakeholders, territories, structures and certifications; being places of innovation and development for beneficiaries; international development and visibility; and an effective quality approach[26].

Importantly, the French model separates the award of the "Excellence" label from direct funding, emphasising that recognition is based on institutional

24 *Ibid.*

25 European Training Foundation. 2025. *A Road to Excellence: International Networking on VET Excellence and Centres of Vocational Excellence for Co-Creating Skills Ecosystems.* Edited by J. Manuel Galvin Arribas. Turin: European Training Foundation. https://openspace.etf.europa.eu/resources/report-road-excellence-international-networking-vet-excellence-and-centres-vocational.

26 Campus of Trades and Qualifications and Campus Excellence: national specifications for obtaining or renewing the label. https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/18/Hebdo45/MENE1800359X.htm?cid_bo=136698

commitment and collaborative capacity rather than financial support. This provides a structured mechanism for aligning education, research, and industry within regional networks, while also offering a tiered recognition system that distinguishes between baseline collaboration and internationally oriented excellence.

Bottom-up models also exist. The Dutch Katapult network of over 300 public-private partnerships preceded Erasmus+ funding. In Finland, Omnia Education Partnerships exemplifies a model built from regional need and multi-sector consolidation. Omnia emerged from the consolidation of four local colleges to support collaboration and cross-sectoral skill development in Espoo's diverse small business environment. The Fellow also received reports of donors investing in the creation and shaping of their own CoVEs.

While fulfilling the Erasmus+ funding requirements imposes certain pre-conditions, as already mentioned, models vary considerably both within and outside the Erasmus+ framework. In its 2020 international study[27] the European Training Foundation developed a taxonomy of four different CoVE types. Some are formed as new and independent providers, purpose-built to meet skills needs in particular regions or sectors, often requiring heavy industry involvement from the outset. Others are existing institutions that are upgraded into CoVEs, expanding their functions to act as hubs for innovation, research, and capacity building within the VET network. A third type functions as regional hubs or networks, coordinating multiple providers and diffusing excellence through collaboration across local or inter-regional ecosystems. Finally, some CoVEs are sectoral or industry-based clusters, closely aligned with specific industries or professional fields, linking training provision directly with economic sectors and their labour market demands. Together, these types illustrate how CoVEs may be designed either as stand-alone providers, transformed institutions, coordinating networks, or sector-focused clusters, depending on national strategies and policy goals. Table 1 below shows the differences at a glance.

Table 1. Types of CoVEs[28]

Type of CoVE	Key Features	Origins	Scope & Focus	Examples
New and independent providers	Purpose-built institutions, often geographically linked to industrial areas; intensive resource needs; early industry involvement crucial	Created from scratch	Stand-alone training centres directly aligned with sectoral/ industrial needs	Morocco (automotive, aeronautics), Bangladesh (leather), Singapore (construction materials)
Existing providers upgraded	Established VET institutions expanded into CoVEs; act as hubs for innovation, research, and capacity building	Built from existing institutions	Extended functions within national/ regional VET systems	Moldova (11 sectors), Armenia (regional state colleges)
Regional hubs or networks	Coordinate multiple institutions; drivers of excellence across networks; share resources, methodologies, and capacity	Formed from networks of providers	Regional or inter-regional ecosystems; focus on collaboration and diffusion of excellence	Mentioned as 'conditional networks' in the study
Sectoral/ industry-based clusters	Linked to industrial bodies or clusters; sectoral organisational remit; strong industry alignment	Created in partnership with industry sectors	Serve specific industries or sectors; often cluster-based	Industrial/ sectoral CoVEs and clusters

27 European Training Foundation, 2020. *Centres of Vocational Excellence: An engine for vocational education and training development*. centres_of_vocational_excellence.pdf (europa.eu)

28 *Ibid.*

Beyond European models, subsequent international research by the European Training Foundation[29] found that CoVEs in non-EU countries also demonstrate diverse approaches to vocational excellence. For instance, in Tunisia, a construction-focused training centre sustains operations through equipment donations, industry-paid training fees, and Erasmus+ mobility projects, fostering partnerships that address local skills shortages. In Serbia, sectoral training centres collaborate with employers to deliver tailored qualifications, while Ukraine's decentralised VET system empowers regional providers to innovate curricula. These examples highlight the importance of flexible governance and stakeholder engagement, offering Australian Centres of Excellence models to adapt for regional needs, particularly in high-demand sectors like green technology and advanced manufacturing, where partnerships can drive systemic impact.

Implications for Australian VET

- Frame Centres as strategic transformation hubs, not just high-performing providers. Their remit should include applied research, innovation transfer, and capability building for sectors.
- Embed Centres in regional innovation ecosystems to ensure alignment with local economic priorities.
- Promote diffusion of excellence, ensuring Centres lift the whole system through mentoring, partnerships, and shared practice.

Understandings and approaches to vocational excellence

A recent article[30] concluded that there is no consistent understanding of what constitutes excellence in VET, contrasting this with higher education, where widely accepted metrics for excellence exist, such as research outputs, teaching quality and institutional rankings. The nearest the *Erasmus+ Programme Guide* comes to a formal definition of vocational excellence is quoted below. As can be seen, this definition is intimately intertwined with the purpose and role of CoVEs as described above.

> *The concept of vocational excellence proposed here is characterised by a holistic, learner-centred approach in which VET:*
>
> - *is an integrated part of skills ecosystems, contributing to regional development, innovation, smart specialisation and clusters strategies, as well as to specific value chains and industrial ecosystems;*
> - *is part of knowledge triangles, working closely with other education and training sectors, the scientific community and business; enables learners to acquire both vocational (job-specific) as well as 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 pedagogies, learner and staff mobility and VET internationalisation strategies.*[31]

While this definition provides a structured baseline, it has evolved over time and understandings of vocational excellence among providers vary, particularly early on. In the words of one interviewee, "...when we're talking about vocational excellence, for one, it looked like an apple, for another it looked like a banana, and the third one thought it was a wooden shoe, so it was almost like, you know, everybody had their own vision of this is excellence". Across the interviews, excellence was described as multifaceted. As another interviewee put it, "So excellence means for us, not only what I

29 European Training Foundation. 2025. *A Road to Excellence: International Networking on VET Excellence and Centres of Vocational Excellence for Co-Creating Skills Ecosystems.* Edited by J. Manuel Galvin Arribas. Turin: European Training Foundation. https://openspace.etf.europa.eu/resources/report-road-excellence-international-networking-vet-excellence-and-centres-vocational.

30 Bohlinger, S. (2025). 'Excellence' in vocational education and training. In E. Quintana-Murci, F. Salvà-Mut, B. E. Stalder, & C. Nägele (Eds.), *Towards inclusive and egalitarian vocational education and training: Key challenges and strategies from a holistic and multi-contextual approach*. Proceedings of the 6th Crossing Boundaries Conference in Vocational Education and Training, Palma, Mallorca, Spain, 21 to 23 May 2025 (pp.53–60). VETNET. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15364860

31 European Commission. 2025. *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, Version 2*. Brussels: European Commission. January 20, 2025: 248-9. https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-01/erasmus-programme-guide-v2.2025_en.pdf

have to do to build more partnerships. It's not only the physical learning I have to do in order to provide my best staff or the industry with more training, it's also motivation and desire. Because excellence is motivation and leadership. It's also governance. It's also the funding."

Expectations of excellence extend to integrated innovation, systemic responsiveness, and ongoing adaptation. Excellence is increasingly seen as a moving target—shaped by changes in pedagogy, technology, and labour market needs—and requiring constant review.

Learner-centred provision was repeatedly cited as a hallmark of excellence: "students are not brought into the classroom and have to adapt to the teacher's way: rather, they are put into a practical environment and coached." It encompasses innovative pedagogies, strong teaching and learning practices, and integration of digitalisation, green skills, and internationalisation. Several respondents linked excellence to a broader skills ecosystem, aligning VET with regional economic strategies and contributing to sustainable development and social cohesion.

International collaboration is also widely seen as a driver of excellence. Some CoVEs extend partnerships beyond Europe—to North African countries, China, South Africa, Canada, and elsewhere—creating channels for global knowledge exchange.

However, in Australia and New Zealand, no formal definition of "excellence" has been proffered in policy. Indeed, the New Zealand interviewee acknowledged that the "excellence" aspect of their work had not been explicitly addressed, highlighting the risk of failing to define and monitor progress towards excellence.

The European Commission's seminal research found that excellence tends to flourish where there is strong leadership, collaboration, autonomy, and sustained stakeholder engagement. Robust teacher professional development, active employer involvement, entrepreneurial learning opportunities, and a culture of responsiveness to industry were common features in high-performing contexts. Indeed, a heavy investment in the continuous upskilling of teaching staff was seen as a core enabler of excellence essential to maintaining high standards, driving innovation in pedagogy, and ensuring alignment with industry needs. Social inclusion was also repeatedly highlighted as a quality factor, not just a moral imperative: excluding groups was seen to limit the talent pool and undermine system-wide improvement. In the words of one interviewee, "Excellence is not excellent if it is not inclusive."

National contexts shape how excellence is framed and pursued. In Finland, excellence is embedded in quality assurance requirements, with all providers expected to see themselves as centres of excellence in their region. This creates a culture where CoVEs are not isolated "beacons" but part of a wider fabric of quality. In France, the model is explicitly bottom-up: excellence grows from grassroots initiatives, with actors supported to develop their own strategies within a national framework. The European Commission perspective emphasises peer learning across diverse systems—identifying what works irrespective of structural differences and encouraging upward convergence across the sector.

Indeed, the economic rationale driving CoVEs, rooted in EU priorities such as green transitions and talent mobility, introduces potential tensions with liberal education principles. While CoVEs enhance competitiveness through small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) innovation and upskilling, they must guard against being perceived as elite institutions that contradict inclusivity. Cedefop's aforementioned special purpose VET scenarios that target at-risk groups, illustrate how social inclusion can be embedded to counter this risk.

Thus, in principle, vocational excellence is widely framed as inclusive rather than competitive. The stated goal is to raise standards across the system, not to create an elite tier. This means encouraging institutions to share materials, adapt good practices, and learn from one another. As one interviewee noted, excellence is about "federating the ecosystem." Engaging underrepresented groups and removing

participation barriers is seen as integral to quality, strengthening both equity and effectiveness. In this framing, inclusiveness operates on two levels: ensuring broad learner participation and enabling collaboration across providers. Both dimensions reinforce the idea that equity and quality are mutually strengthening.

In practice, however, some structural features introduce competitive dynamics alongside the inclusive vision. In France, for example, the "excellence label" differentiates between classic and excellent CoVEs, creating a formal tiering. Erasmus+ funding for CoVEs is also awarded through competitive selection, meaning not all applicants gain entry to the network. Nonetheless, successful CoVEs tend to balance these dynamics—maintaining the collaborative, open exchange of practice that supports inclusion, while meeting the benchmarks and performance expectations that come with competitive processes.

Frameworks for excellence

Several frameworks for excellence were in evidence. The European Training Foundation, which facilitates the European Network for Excellence (ENE), has developed two. With over 330 member institutions across more than 50 countries, the ENE acts as a key collaborative platform for CoVEs across Europe and beyond. It provides a forum for discussion on CoVE development, organises regular meetings and peer learning activities, and fosters exchanges between projects. As a knowledge hub, it collects, analyses, and disseminates information on vocational excellence, from policy updates to practical tools and case studies. Members benefit from mutual support in developing and improving their initiatives, as well as opportunities to link with other European and international programs. With access to these connections and resources, the ENE plays a pivotal role in supporting and shaping the pursuit of excellence.

1. ENESAT

The European Network for Excellence Self-assessment Tool (ENESAT) offers a structured approach for assessing and strengthening excellence, supporting the network's goal of sharing effective practice and building capacity across diverse systems.

The ENESAT provides a structured, evidence-based approach to understanding and developing vocational excellence. It is built around ten dimensions:

- Lifelong learning and vocational excellence
- Education-business cooperation (e.g., work-based learning, public-private partnerships)
- Pedagogy and professional development
- Entrepreneurial dimension of vocational excellence
- Industry 4.0/5.0 and digitalisation
- Autonomy and institutional development (financing, leadership, governance)
- Going green – supporting sustainable goals
- Smart specialisation – mobilising innovation, ecosystems, and SMEs
- Excellence in social inclusion and equity
- Career guidance and vocational excellence[32].

Each indicator within these dimensions is described across four developmental levels, from emerging to advanced. This developmental structure allows providers to locate their current position, identify achievable next steps, and monitor progress over time. The tool supports both self-assessment and peer review, encouraging providers to collect and analyse evidence, benchmark themselves against peers, and adapt improvement strategies to their specific national or regional context.

The tool is designed not just for measurement but for growth. By linking its indicators to broader economic, social, and environmental priorities, it reinforces the idea that excellence is not a fixed status but an

32 European Training Foundation. 2025. *Self-Assessment for Centres of Vocational Excellence*. ETF – European Training Foundation. Accessed May 30, 2025. https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/self-assessment-centres-vocational-excellence.

evolving practice. It has been widely adopted across diverse countries within the network, facilitating peer learning and helping providers adapt ideas and approaches from other systems while remaining grounded in local realities. It is available to the ENE membership, which Australian providers may join.

Figure 6. Fellow at the European Training Foundation, Turin, Italy

2. ISATCOVE

While ENESAT is seen as the gateway tool, the European Training Foundation also developed the International Self-Assessment Tool for CoVEs (ISATCOVE) to support the EU's strategy to drive vocational excellence through international collaboration. A digital platform, the ISATCOVE has 23 criteria across three categories: Teaching and Learning, Partnership and Cooperation, and Governance and Funding. It provides flexibility, allowing providers to focus on the specific aspects most relevant for them. For CoVEs working collaboratively across borders, ISATCOVE facilitates joint self-assessment, shared targets and collective self-improvement. Its database enables shared insights on vocational excellence across the globe[33].

3. Blueprint of Excellence

Finland's *Blueprint of Excellence*[34] was developed by Omnia Education Partnerships as the technical partner to the European Training Foundation. The model represents a mechanism for analysing excellence. It comprises "horizontal" layers of more traditionally recognised features of excellence interlaced with newer, "vertical" elements. The foundational aspects comprise:

- Infrastructure (all aspects of the physical learning environment);
- Human resources including both staff and students, the opportunities available for learning and growth, and the organisational culture;
- The pedagogical landscape, including all aspects of learning support, soft skills and mindset development;
- Systems and processes including quality assurance;
- Stakeholder collaboration including, amongst a wide range of other activities, public and private collaboration, regional development, and work-based learning.

These more traditional aspects are now infused with greening, digitalisation, innovation, and a more recent addition, inclusion. The four "vertical" elements are intended to infiltrate and influence every aspect of each of the horizontal layers. As the Finnish interviewee pointed out, ten years ago the foundational elements would have been sufficient to claim excellence, but the concept has moved on to embedding the vertical elements as essential hallmarks of true excellence as it is now understood. The model is represented graphically below.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Omnia Education Partnerships. 2024. *Blueprint for Vocational Excellence.* Omnia Education Partnerships. Accessed September 15, 2025. https://www.oep.fi/blueprint-for-vocational-excellence.

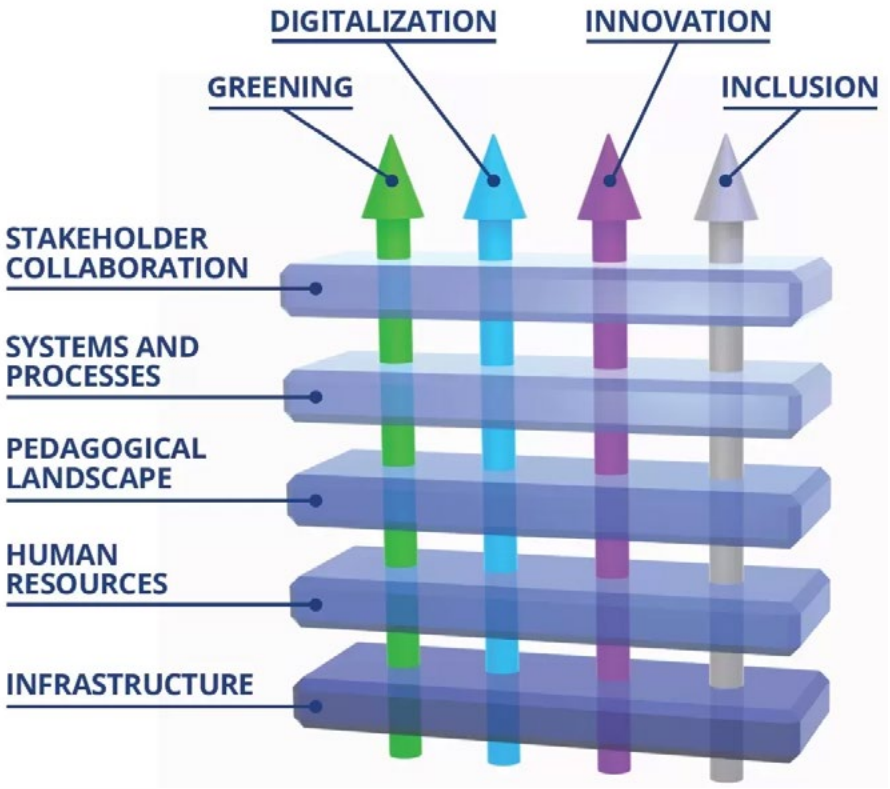

Figure 7. Omnia Education Partnerships' Blueprint of Excellence

Implications for Australian VET

- Develop a national definition of excellence that is holistic, learner-centred, and inclusive—covering governance, pedagogy, applied research, and social impact.
- Embed excellence as systemic, not elite, raising quality across the whole system. For Victoria, this involves a shift from competitive to collaborative excellence.
- Make teacher capability and continuous professional development a core enabler of excellence, alongside innovation in pedagogy and digitalisation.
- Adopt and adapt self-assessment tools and join peer networks.
- Australia's national cross-cutting priorities of gender equality, Closing the Gap, supporting the Net Zero transformation, and ensuring Australia's digital and technology capability align with greening, digitalisation, innovation and inclusion. Adapt the Blueprint of Excellence model by embedding these national priorities as the "vertical" elements that are woven into all aspects of Centre operations.

Partnerships and governance

Partnerships are central to the CoVE model. Rather than conventional institutional collaborations, CoVEs are designed to create high-impact, place-based, and usually sector-specific ecosystems that bring together a wide and diverse range of actors. These include VET providers, employers (both SMEs and large enterprises), peak bodies, universities, social partners, regional governments, and, in some cases, non-government organisations (NGOs). Together, they form shared learning and innovation ecosystems capable of improving alignment between training and labour market needs while supporting regional economic development.

The rationale for these partnerships is both strategic and practical. Strategically, CoVEs enable a coordinated, whole-of-system response to challenges such as technological change, workforce shortages, and sustainability transitions. Practically, they facilitate co-creation of training programs, promote the development of more relevant qualifications, and open up better employment pathways for learners. Crucially, CoVE partnerships solve complex problems that no single party could address alone.

Partnership formation varies across national contexts, but several patterns are evident. In countries such as France and Greece, CoVEs are often anchored by public–private consortia led by VET providers in collaboration with social partners, regional authorities, and industry associations to address skills mismatches. In places like the Netherlands, CoVEs typically emerge from the bottom up—as collaborative projects or networks that gradually gain formal status after demonstrating real-world impact. National and international funding schemes, including Erasmus+ and innovation-oriented programs, often serve as catalysts for partnership formation by requiring joint proposals and shared accountability from the outset.

While structures and processes differ, successful partnerships typically begin with a shared diagnosis of a sectoral challenge and a clear articulation of the value proposition for each stakeholder. Effective governance arrangements usually include multi-level engagement involving both national and regional actors, a lead coordinating body (often a VET institution or neutral intermediary), and formal agreements such as Memoranda of Understanding that clarify roles, responsibilities, and contributions. A strong emphasis is placed on decentralised collaboration, enabling adaptation to local priorities within broader strategic frameworks.

In some systems—such as France and New Zealand—providers serve as organisational shells for the CoVE partnership. The CoVEs are legally and operationally distinct from government departments or the education institutions that host them and serve as “third space” entities capable of bridging institutional silos and facilitating coordination across sectors.

Elsewhere, intermediary bodies such as Katapult in the Netherlands, play a key enabling role by brokering relationships, supporting quality assurance, and maintaining shared knowledge and innovation infrastructure—without directly delivering training themselves. For instance, Katapult has built a range of tools to support CoVEs. Amongst others, they include an online, multilateral network and matchmaking tool to assist CoVEs to find partners; an online collaboration toolkit; a stakeholder analysis tool; and a roadmap for achieving CoVE status[35]. Katapult also hosts a monthly mixed Community of Practice meeting for industry and educators, reinforcing long-term engagement.

Figure 8. Domplein (Cathedral Square), Utrecht, The Netherlands

35 https://www.wearekatapult.eu/tools/

Partnerships are reinforced through pooled resources and shared operational infrastructure. This includes blended funding models drawing on government grants, employer contributions, in-kind support, co-located labs, training centres, digital platforms, and innovation hubs. These lead to jointly developed curricula, micro-credentials, and teaching tools. Human capital is also shared across partners—through seconded staff, multi-institution project teams, and embedded innovation or research roles.

While Erasmus+ does allow for broader challenges, sector-specific collaboration is a defining feature. CoVEs often concentrate on a single economic sector—such as agri-food, green energy, or tourism—engaging deeply with employers and industry bodies. While this is the dominant arrangement, one interviewee commented cross-pollination between CoVEs is essential; that the issues faced by these organisations are similar, regardless of sector. She suggested that cross-sectoral CoVEs could be more efficient and effective in some circumstances.

Sectoral engagement takes multiple forms: co-design of training, participation in skills forecasting, involvement in applied research, provision of work-based learning, and support for regional innovation clusters or value chains. National sectoral networks further reinforce these partnerships by fostering cross-regional collaboration and promoting the harmonisation of standards and practices.

Importantly, the best CoVE partnerships do not operate in isolation. They are globally curious, seeking out knowledge and insights beyond national borders to inform local action. As one interviewee explained: “The idea… I usually call ‘think global and act local.’… International partnerships basically learn from each other, share good experiences… understanding that although in the end delivery of VET is very local, this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be attentive to what is happening elsewhere.” Through partnerships, this outward-facing mindset enables CoVEs to import ideas, adapt global practices, and benchmark their performance against international standards—further strengthening their capacity to act as innovation engines within their own localities.

CoVEs need genuine autonomy and the authority to act. That autonomy rests on trust and clear accountability—both among partners and between funders and CoVEs—so decisions can be timely and responsive to local needs. New Zealand’s ConCOVE illustrates this: funding was devolved to the organisation to commission research and support projects at its discretion. International experience likewise shows that strong partnerships, rather than institutional excellence alone, define CoVEs; collaboration, mutual trust, and shared accountability make the model work.

Finally, the French interviewees spoke of the critical importance of the CoVE director. The role is central to the governance and success of the CoVE, acting as a bridge between the public and private sectors and helping to manage competition while fostering collaboration. It was described as both strategically significant and operationally demanding. It is a full-time, dedicated position—not an add-on to an existing role—and is typically funded by the Ministry, although in some cases, companies may contribute to the cost. The director is often referred to as the “chef d’orchestre” or conductor, responsible for coordinating and federating the diverse consortium of stakeholders.

The director must possess a unique blend of skills. Soft skills are crucial, including political acumen, diplomacy, relationship-building, and the ability to foster trust and legitimacy within the ecosystem. These interpersonal capabilities are essential for navigating complex stakeholder environments and for leading cultural and systemic change. Operationally, the director must be skilled in project management, strategic planning, and governance, with a deep understanding of vocational education and training (VET) systems, industry needs, and regional development priorities. The role also demands the ability to translate industry needs into training solutions, including curriculum innovation and the development of micro-credentials. The French Ministry is currently working with France’s leading university to develop a qualification specifically for these roles.

Implications for Australian VET

- Move beyond transactional partnerships to build trust-based, co-governance models with shared accountability.
- Map the place-based ecosystem — including government, education, business, and civil society actors — and explore roles for each.
- Provide Centres with autonomy, underpinned by devolved funding and transparent reporting to enable responsiveness and sustain collaboration beyond initial grants.
- Professionalise the CoVE director role—it should be a full-time, dedicated leadership position, not an add-on to existing duties, requiring exceptional skills including political acumen, stakeholder engagement skills, and the ability to lead cultural transformation across sectors.

Industry and sectoral engagement

CoVEs have redefined the relationship between vocational education and industry, moving beyond transactional arrangements—such as ad hoc consultations—towards strategic, long-term partnerships. CoVEs embed VET providers within sectoral ecosystems, enabling sustained responsiveness to industry needs while fostering mutual value creation. They act as knowledge brokers, innovation hubs, and talent pipelines, contributing to curriculum co-design, applied research, micro-credential development, and regional economic strategies. In doing so, they help transform vocational education from a reactive training service into a proactive driver of workforce transformation.

Industry engagement is central: companies co-design curricula, mentor students, offer work placements and help co-fund activities. In turn, CoVEs offer multiple benefits for industry – especially SMEs. These include access to skilled talent through work-based learning, the opportunity to co-design training to ensure relevance and responsiveness, support for innovation through applied research and prototyping, participation in communities of practice, and visibility as part of nationally or regionally recognised excellence initiatives. The impact of these partnerships is tangible: improved student employability, more vibrant regional entrepreneurship ecosystems, and the emergence of new industry relationships that would not otherwise have occurred.

A consistent theme across interviews was the unique niche CoVEs occupy within the vocational ecosystem. Unlike traditional providers or government bodies, CoVEs have the autonomy, mandate, and agility to convene difficult stakeholder conversations, conduct labour market analysis, pilot training responses ahead of mainstream systems, and lead applied research efforts that other institutions may not be equipped to undertake. This positions them as critical agents of both system agility and sectoral foresight.

The cumulative value of CoVEs is evident in the long-term outcomes they help produce. Many require time to establish credibility, especially in systems unaccustomed to cross-institutional collaboration. However, once embedded, CoVEs often become trusted partners in innovation and workforce development. Their presence supports a culture of co-creation, with employers increasingly viewing education providers not as service suppliers, but as strategic collaborators.

The legacy of CoVEs extends far beyond individual projects. They have helped lift the quality of dialogue across sectors, embedded innovation mindsets into vocational institutions, shifted behaviours across education and industry, and even influenced national policy conversations in systems where formal change has yet to occur. Importantly, CoVEs often lay the foundations for long-term transformation, establishing networks, tools, and cultural shifts that persist well beyond initial funding cycles.

Higher Apprenticeships

Internationally, higher or degree apprenticeships are increasingly used to address skills shortages, strengthen industry–education partnerships, and widen participation in higher-level learning. They combine the rigour of a degree with structured, work-based training, allowing learners to “earn while they learn.”

These models are well established in countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany, are being piloted in New Zealand, and feature in the agenda for Australian TAFE Centres of Excellence. Early trials in New Zealand highlight both the potential and the policy barriers: apprenticeships there remain largely confined to lower-level qualifications, despite strong employer demand for graduates with both higher-level knowledge and job readiness. Similar constraints exist in Australia, where vocational and higher education remain largely divided.

Despite these barriers, innovation is occurring in New Zealand. ConCOVE has initiated four pilots in construction-related fields. These are not yet at enrolment stage but have tested frameworks for how industry and providers might co-deliver. Industry response has been overwhelmingly positive, with employers valuing the opportunity to influence training directly and address longstanding frustrations with graduate work-readiness.

Degree apprenticeships strengthen local skills ecosystems by integrating vocational and higher education in ways that benefit industry, learners, and providers alike. Employers gain a pipeline of graduates who are both technically qualified and practically experienced, addressing the trust gap that often exists when hiring university graduates. For learners, they open pathways that are more flexible, affordable, and inclusive, particularly for groups underrepresented in higher education. In New Zealand, for example, architectural bodies have identified degree apprenticeships as a way to attract more Māori and Pasifika learners, who are currently underrepresented in the profession[36]. Similar opportunities exist in Australia for Indigenous learners, women in male-dominated fields, and those who would otherwise be excluded from full-time higher education due to financial or family commitments.

Implications for Australia

- Move from consultation to co-creation: industry should co-design curricula, co-invest in infrastructure, and participate in applied research.
- Position Centres as innovation brokers—anticipating skills shifts, piloting solutions, and supporting SMEs with capability uplift. Aim to operate in the system gaps.

Benefits and impacts on local skills ecosystems

Policy-focused interviewees spoke of how CoVEs strengthen local and regional skills ecosystems by acting as catalysts for innovation, upskilling, and system coordination. They link vocational education to broader regional strategies—including smart specialisation, green and digital transitions, and innovation agendas—ensuring that training provision responds not only to current industry demand but also to emerging societal needs.

They also explained how CoVEs support strategic workforce planning through regional labour market intelligence and create pathways for both youth and adult learners, encompassing re-skilling and upskilling opportunities. They align VET with economic development and investment attraction efforts, and they facilitate regional governance models that bring together providers, industry, and government. In so doing, they shift VET from a reactive service to an integrated engine of local capability.

Across systems, CoVEs have driven tangible changes to what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is recognised. Curriculum updates are now increasingly informed by labour market forecasting and employer input. Future-focused capabilities—including green competencies, digital literacy, and transversal skills—have become central to contemporary training.

36 Scalan, Peter. *Degree-Level Apprenticeships (DLA): A Systems Gap Analysis for Transformative Change in the Aotearoa New Zealand Vocational Education and Training Sector Pipeline*. Auckland: ConCOVE Tūhura, November 2023.

CoVEs have also played a significant role in the expansion of micro-credentials and modular offerings, enabling flexible, stackable learning that better matches the needs of learners and industry. An interviewee from the tourism-sector CoVE noted that "everything will be micro credentials," emphasising a shift toward modularisation and the inclusion of transversal soft skills. Cedefop similarly described CoVEs as "exemplary" in delivering new forms of training tailored to key sectors such as greening, digital transformation, healthcare, and manufacturing. In Finland, the Omnia Education Partnerships model integrates Recognition of Prior Learning and micro-credential stacking, where national learning outcomes support flexible, personalised learning plans that blend college-based training with apprenticeships, adapting to individual paces. One such example highlighted how a business college and polytechnic collaborated with digital SMEs to co-design micro-credentials in cybersecurity and data analytics, showcasing how CoVEs directly co-create agile, work-integrated, future-focused solutions with industry that are tailored to learner goals.

CoVEs are playing a vital role in advancing curriculum innovation to meet the demands of green and digital transitions. An example was given in the hospitality sector, where providers are rethinking traditional training content to incorporate digital hospitality, sustainable food practices, and enhanced client experiences. These changes address contemporary industry challenges such as food waste, sustainable menu development, and responsible storage practices, signalling a shift toward future-ready, environmentally conscious service delivery. More broadly, Cedefop highlighted the strategic importance of such innovation, noting that CoVEs working in areas linked to the green transition are well-positioned to contribute meaningfully to the European Green Deal[37] targets. These initiatives reflect how vocational education, when driven by sector foresight and regional sustainability goals, can become a key enabler of systemic change.

These innovations extend to qualification design. In some systems, national qualifications have been adapted to better reflect regional and sectoral needs. Pedagogical changes have also occurred, with coaching-based models and hands-on, practical learning environments becoming more prevalent. These settings are particularly well-suited to diverse learner profiles, including those underrepresented in traditional VET.

Several interviewees cited both quantitative and qualitative evidence of improved outcomes associated with CoVE involvement. These include higher learner engagement—particularly among younger generations—greater participation in work-based learning and applied projects, improved employment outcomes compared to traditional VET pathways, and longitudinal tracking of graduates showing sustained benefits. Learner-centred design, practical delivery, and industry co-ownership underpinned these results.

In systems where VET has not traditionally included research functions, CoVEs are helping to fill this gap. They engage in applied research on teaching, learning, and emerging skills needs; generate tools such as good practice guides and skills standards; and offer insights that influence system-level decision-making. This expands the intellectual infrastructure of vocational education, enhancing its status and relevance within broader education and innovation systems.

Beyond immediate training outputs, CoVEs have driven broader behavioural and cultural shifts. These include greater openness to difficult or transformative conversations across agencies, increased collaboration and cross-institutional learning, a stronger focus on quality assurance and self-evaluation, and institutional changes such as the integration of internationalisation and sustainability into core strategies. These shifts embed a culture of excellence and responsiveness that outlasts individual projects or funding cycles.

37 European Commission. *The European Green Deal*. European Commission, updated 2019–2024. Accessed September 20, 2025. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

Figure 9. The Fellow with staff from AKMI, host organisation for the TourX CoVE, Athens, Greece

Implications for Australian VET

- Use Centres to drive curriculum innovation and make it more responsive, integrating local labour market intelligence into delivery by embedding transversal skills, digital literacy, and green capabilities, using micro-credentials, modular pathways, and RPL.
- Position VET as a strategic partner in regional development, contributing to economic diversification, sustainability, and social inclusion.
- Embed applied research, building capacity for practice-based research with industry to generate evidence, tools, and insights that lift sector-wide quality and responsiveness.
- Drive cultural change, using Centres to model collaboration, evaluation, and international outlooks, embedding sustainability and learner-centred design as enduring system practices.

Challenges associated with establishing and maintaining CoVEs

Establishing and sustaining Centres of Vocational Excellence is complex and context-dependent, often requiring navigation of unfamiliar policy, funding, and partnership terrains. Despite their clear value, CoVEs are not easily bolted onto existing systems—they frequently demand structural innovation, cultural shifts, and sustained advocacy.

A foundational challenge is the misalignment between CoVE functions and existing funding or governance frameworks. They often begin via pilot or EU seed funding, but their functions don't map cleanly onto traditional roles or funding streams. Therefore, national governments are called upon to create tailored supports to sustain them. Whether or not this happens depends on political will, systemic adaptability and resource availability. This is an acute challenge in the context of European countries redirecting funds towards defence initiatives in the current climate of geopolitical instability.

For CoVEs that sit outside formal training pipelines, maintaining credibility while fostering collaboration can present a distinct challenge. As one interviewee noted, their organisation is not embedded within the direct system of training delivery or learner certification. This external positioning affords them a degree of independence—particularly in generating research insights and critiquing system behaviours—but it also places them in a precarious relational position. The need to critically assess system performance while relying on participation and goodwill from other system actors creates a delicate balancing act. On one hand, research must remain honest and transparent to retain its integrity and value. On the other, those same critiques can strain relationships with providers, policymakers, or other partners whose cooperation is essential for ongoing work. This is particularly pronounced in smaller systems, where reputational dynamics are amplified, and professional communities are tightly interconnected.

The interviewee went on to reflect that holding up "a critical lens" has, at times, been challenging, particularly when findings were "not particularly flattering." However, they also observed that the discomfort caused by difficult conversations may have led to improvements in behaviour and discourse across the system. In this way, the CoVE's independent positioning may be both a constraint and a value-add—offering the system a mirror it might otherwise avoid. This example highlights a broader challenge for CoVEs that operate as brokers, catalysts, or research-driven entities who must navigate the tension between system integration and system critique, often without formal authority or embedded status.

Designing effective partnerships and governance models also presents significant hurdles. Large partnerships—often spanning 20 or more institutions—are difficult to coordinate. Building trust, clarifying roles, and maintaining motivation across such diverse actors takes time and relational labour. Some organisations explicitly avoid mandating participation, arguing that only partnerships which create real value will endure. But even where goodwill exists, managing complexity across institutions, sectors, and regions remains a key operational challenge.

Policy integration and systemic recognition are further barriers. Several interviewees noted the difficulty of fitting new models into legacy systems. This includes embedding CoVE functions into national strategies, gaining access to sustainable funding, and navigating slow or fragmented government responses. For example, one interviewee described the difficulty of working with regional authorities who lacked the agility to support emerging needs. Others emphasised the difficulty of aligning sectoral, regional, and national interests—particularly in decentralised or federated systems.

Cultural and behavioural change also proved difficult. In systems unused to cross-sectoral collaboration or distributed leadership, building a "culture of quality assurance" or a mindset of co-creation was not straightforward. It requires not only new processes but shifts in institutional identity and ways of working. As some noted, excellence in this context is not about infrastructure or status, but about sustained, meaningful impact—something that requires long-term behavioural change and clear accountability.

Finally, the intangible nature of CoVE impact—especially in early stages—can make justification and continuation difficult. Outcomes such as improved collaboration, applied research capability, or changes in curriculum relevance may take years to materialise. Without short-term, measurable outputs, it can be difficult to maintain stakeholder support, especially where funders or policymakers expect quick returns. Interviewees from multiple contexts noted that credibility was hard won and easily lost in this regard.

Implications for Australian VET

- Plan for sustainability from the outset: diversify funding, secure governance stability, and embed Centres in policy frameworks.
- Shift culture and accountability by using Centres to model co-creation, cross-sectoral collaboration, and shared responsibility, recognising that excellence depends on sustained behavioural change rather than infrastructure alone.
- Track early wins while building legacy, balancing the need for short-term, visible outcomes with long-term systemic impacts, to maintain credibility and stakeholder confidence. Recognise that cultural change and long-term impact take time; evaluation frameworks must reflect this reality.

Monitoring and evaluation of CoVE performance and outcomes

Evaluation of CoVEs extends beyond basic metrics to include robust frameworks that ensure long-term impact. The *Erasmus+ Programme Guide* outlines specific criteria, such as the European Quality Assurance in VET[38] (EQAVET) standards, which guide quality processes, and requires the

38 European Commission. n.d. *EQAVET - European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training.* European Commission, Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion. Accessed September 15, 2025. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/working-together/eqavet-european-quality-assurance-vocational-education-and-training_en.

development of long-term action plans to sustain outcomes beyond the initial four-year funding cycle. Within the concept of upward convergence, CoVEs measure their value-add through regional innovation impacts and longitudinal graduate tracking, assessing enduring legacies such as sustained partnerships and enhanced employment rates.

CoVEs funded under Erasmus+ are required to establish structured evaluation frameworks from the outset. The *Erasmus+ Programme Guide* outlines a clear expectation that applicants will propose both quantitative and qualitative indicators to monitor progress and assess both short- and long-term impact. The long-term action plans for sustainability include governance structures, scalability pathways, and financial models for continuation beyond EU funding.

A key requirement is the inclusion of an independent external quality assurance mechanism. Projects must plan for independent assessments at both the midterm and final stages, evaluating the quality of activities, outputs, and overall outcomes. Continuous monitoring and peer benchmarking are also encouraged. Key performance indicators, milestones, and defined evaluation phases are scrutinised during the application process and form part of ongoing oversight.

These expectations are operationalised by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, which manages CoVE projects on behalf of the Commission. Projects are required to report regularly—typically every three months—and funding is released incrementally based on achievement of milestones. Evaluation findings also contribute to midterm reviews of the CoVE initiative itself, determining whether it should be continued or adapted.

Individual CoVEs define their own performance indicators as part of their project planning. These vary according to context, but commonly include metrics such as:

- Employment and job insertion rates
- Number of micro-credentials issued
- Stakeholder satisfaction and engagement
- Innovation or sustainability outcomes
- Number of partnerships or co-investments
- Uptake of outputs and resources.

Some CoVEs supplement quantitative tracking with qualitative evaluation, such as stakeholder interviews and testimonial collection. For instance, the Campus initiative in France evaluates CoVEs annually against ministry-defined criteria, while also conducting qualitative interviews with college leaders, teachers, and industry partners to understand behavioural and pedagogical impact. The results inform both funding renewal decisions and strategic improvement.

The approach to external evaluation in the French system is undergoing a deliberate shift. Initially, campuses at the “excellence” level were expected to commission external evaluations as part of their quality assurance processes. However, there were no formal guidelines on how such evaluations should be conducted. As a result, many campuses engaged private consulting or audit firms—an approach that over five years proved costly, unproductive, often diverted resources from more strategic work, and failed to capture meaningful impacts. Instead, the system is now experimenting with more sustainable and internally driven models. The new approach aims to build a “culture of quality assurance” by encouraging evaluations conducted by peers from other campuses or regional teams. This peer-based method is seen as both cost-effective and developmental—providing constructive feedback in a “coaching” spirit, rather than serving solely as a gatekeeping function for bureaucratic reporting and accreditation.

Others, like the Katapult network in the Netherlands, go further by conducting longitudinal studies, tracking learner outcomes over a decade and comparing results to traditional VET pathways. Their indicators cover entrepreneurial income, ecosystem expansion, and qualitative changes in learning engagement.

The aforementioned European Training Foundation's self-assessment tools and Omnia's Blueprint of Excellence offer multi-dimensional frameworks through which CoVEs can audit their performance. These tools are not prescriptive but aim to inspire capacity-building and shared improvement across systems. Interviewees from both of these organisations noted, however, that macro-level data and common CoVE indicators remain underdeveloped. While the Erasmus+ application process encourages structured evaluation, national-level evaluation mechanisms are rare, and many countries lack dedicated indicators to track CoVE impact. As a result, the European Training Foundation and its partners are advocating for mandatory self-assessment processes as part of future eligibility conditions.

While the frameworks are comprehensive, interviewees acknowledged several challenges in implementation. In New Zealand, ConCOVE's evaluation processes were shaped by the funder's initial criteria, but these were described as "loose" and focused more on deliverables than excellence. This lack of precision reduced the focus on outcomes and made it difficult to assess transformational impact. ConCOVE proposed using European evaluation tools but was advised not to pursue this given their limited timeframe—perhaps reflecting a missed opportunity to adopt more robust evaluation practices.

A further concern raised by multiple interviewees was the burden of monitoring in the early stages of CoVE development. Overemphasis on compliance may stifle innovation before partnerships and activities have matured. A more developmental approach—phased over time—was seen as critical to long-term effectiveness.

Implications for Australian VET

- Adopt multi-dimensional evaluation frameworks combining quantitative metrics with qualitative insights and long-term impact tracking around metrics such as employment outcomes, sustained partnerships, innovation outputs, and learner engagement.
- Embed peer review and self-assessment tools (e.g., ENESAT, ISATCOVE) to build a culture of improvement that is cost-effective and developmental and includes international benchmarking.
- Balance rigour with flexibility by avoiding overburdening early-stage Centres with compliance; use phased evaluation that supports innovation while still building accountability.

05
Considerations and Next Steps

Considerations for the Federal Government

- The Federal Government may wish to explore a national definition of excellence that is holistic, learner-centred, and inclusive, spanning governance, pedagogy, applied research, and social impact.
- There could be value in positioning Centres as systemic transformation hubs, not just high-performing providers, by linking them with regional development and innovation strategies, in addition to national priorities.
- Federal funding models might be designed to devolve greater authority to Centres, with autonomy supported by transparent reporting and long-term sustainability plans.
- Mechanisms could be developed for cross-sector and cross-regional knowledge sharing, ensuring that excellence diffuses across the whole system rather than remaining isolated.
- The use of international self-assessment and peer-review tools (e.g. ENESAT, ISATCOVE) and frameworks such as the Blueprint of Excellence might be encouraged to benchmark performance and promote continuous improvement.
- A phased approach to evaluation and improvement might be considered, balancing accountability with innovation, especially during the early years of Centre development.

Considerations for the Victorian Government

- The NSA conception of TAFE Centres of Excellence bypasses the emphasis on place-based, regional development role of European CoVEs. Victoria may wish to leverage its co-funding role to align Centres more closely with state-wide priorities and regional development initiatives.
- Victoria could take a leading role in promoting collaborative excellence, encouraging shared responsibility and co-creation across providers rather than competition.

Considerations for existing TAFE Centres of Excellence

- Existing Centres might look to deepen industry collaboration by moving beyond consultation towards co-creation—involving employers in curriculum design, applied research, and shared infrastructure.
- They may also wish to strengthen their role as innovation brokers, anticipating local skills shifts, piloting solutions, and supporting SMEs with capability uplift.
- Sustainability might be enhanced by diversifying funding sources and consolidating governance arrangements beyond short-term projects.

- Centres could consider using evaluation frameworks to balance early wins with long-term legacies, ensuring visibility while also building systemic impact.
- Centres might adopt and adapt the Framework of Excellence model to embed the cross-cutting national priorities into all aspects of their operations.
- Credibility and continuous improvement might be strengthened by engaging in international benchmarking and peer learning through membership of international networks and adoption of international excellence frameworks.

Considerations for aspiring TAFE Centres of Excellence and other providers

- Aspiring Centres could begin by mapping the local ecosystem and articulating a clear value proposition for partners, grounded in a shared diagnosis of sectoral or regional challenges.
- They may find value in using Katapult's Roadmap to a Centre of Vocational Excellence[39] tool or Business Model Canvas[40] to assist.
- Trust and credibility might be built through tangible, co-created initiatives that deliver early value and demonstrate impact.
- New Centres could benefit from embedding learner-centred design and pedagogical innovation—digitalisation, green skills, and transversal capabilities—as defining features.
- Planning from the outset for long-term sustainability—including funding, scaling, and policy alignment—may help ensure lasting impact.
- The appointment of a dedicated director role warrants careful consideration. It is a complex role, requiring exceptional skills.

Ultimately, the lesson from international CoVEs is that excellence is not an exclusive status but an evolving practice. Providers who are not seeking formal designation as a TAFE Centre of Excellence can still adopt the mindset and practices of excellence—innovating, collaborating, and embedding cross-cutting national priorities into their work. In doing so, they contribute to raising standards across the system and ensure that vocational education in Australia remains adaptive, inclusive, and future-ready.

However, it should be noted that CoVEs are systemic in nature. They are conceived as whole-of-organisation and whole-of-ecosystem initiatives. While selective improvement initiatives may deliver incremental gains, they are unlikely to achieve the intended deeper transformation at organisational, sectoral, and regional ecosystem levels that emerges from the interplay of multiple dimensions of excellence working in concert.

Challenges for Australian implementation

While the Fellowship has highlighted significant opportunities for Australia to learn from international models of Centres of Vocational Excellence, there are also limitations and challenges that must be acknowledged. These are not barriers to progress, but factors that will need careful management if the lessons of this research are to be successfully adapted to the Australian context.

A central complexity lies in the transferability of international models. European CoVEs operate within funding, governance, and cultural environments that differ considerably from those of Australia. For example, the availability of large-scale, multi-year Erasmus+ grants has enabled European CoVEs to develop robust networks and infrastructure that may not be directly replicable here. Providers will need to adapt international models to fit local funding cycles, regulatory frameworks, and industry structures.

Sustainability presents another hurdle. International experience shows that establishing a Centre is only the beginning: maintaining momentum requires stable funding, strong governance, careful

39 Roadmap to a Centre of Vocational Excellence
40 https://www.wearekatapult.eu/tools/business-model-canvas/

relationship management amongst the partners and long-term stakeholder buy-in. Australian providers, and the governments that support them, will need to guard against the risk of Centres being perceived as short-term projects rather than enduring institutions capable of driving systemic change.

Another significant challenge lies in Australia's slow process of developing and revising Training Package qualifications, which sometimes leaves qualifications misaligned with contemporary industry demands and makes it difficult to respond swiftly to local and emerging skills needs. Providers must therefore find ways to remain responsive and innovative without undermining the consistency in qualification outcomes that a national system is designed to ensure. For the most part, this adaptability must be achieved through the way qualifications are delivered—by leveraging creative pedagogy and work-based learning. The Basque ETHAZI model of collaborative challenge-based learning, for instance, demonstrates how twenty-first century skills can be cultivated through pedagogy itself, rather than as additional curriculum content[41]. In some cases, TAFE Centres of Excellence will need to lead the development of new qualifications.

Cultural and behavioural change is also a significant hurdle. Many CoVEs overseas emerged in contexts where collaborative approaches to governance and innovation were already established. In Victoria in particular, shifting from traditional models of provider autonomy in a contested training market towards more open, trust-based collaboration will require time, relational effort, and consistent leadership. Providers may need to invest in staff development and institutional culture change to ensure that collaborative, learner-centred, and innovation-oriented practices take root.

Yet another tension concerns the timeframes for impact. International CoVEs often required several years to demonstrate tangible outcomes, particularly in relation to cultural change, applied research capacity, and industry transformation.

Policymakers and funders in Australia will need to balance the expectation of short-term results with the recognition that genuine excellence takes time to mature. This tension between quick returns and long-term transformation is likely to be an ongoing challenge.

Finally, TAFE Centres of Excellence that position themselves as independent or critical voices within the system may face the delicate task of balancing critique with collaboration. International examples show that while such independence can add value by holding up a mirror to system performance, it can also strain relationships with stakeholders whose cooperation is essential. Australian Centres may encounter similar tensions as they seek to provide honest assessments of the system while depending on goodwill and partnership to operate effectively.

Acknowledging these challenges underlines the importance of thoughtful design, careful adaptation of international models, and ongoing dialogue between providers, governments, and industry to ensure that Centres are positioned for sustainable success.

Next steps for the Fellow

As stated in the introduction, the impetus for this research was twofold: to address gaps in the Australian policy landscape around TAFE Centres of Excellence, and to inform WAI's considerations of applying for Centre of Excellence status. While the bulk of the sector-wide work will commence with publication of this report, progress has already begun with the sharing of preliminary findings with another ISS Institute Fellow from a Centre of Excellence who is researching a similar area. Beyond WAI, the research will be shared for the benefit of the wider Australian VET sector as outlined in Section 6 below.

Internally, discussions exploring the concept of CoVEs and the opportunities they may present for the Institute have been initiated with the Executive and will continue with the Board, the Academic Board, and general staff. These conversations are

41 Williams, Melanie. "Collaborative Challenge-Based Learning: A Case Study for Twenty-First Century Skills Development." *International Journal of Training Research*, 1–19, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2024.2385908.

laying the groundwork for a considered institutional response and future planning. There is considerable work to be done.

06
Impacts of Fellowship

Personally

On a personal level, the Fellowship has broadened horizons well beyond the professional sphere. Travelling to Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece and Turkey for the first time extended knowledge of European culture and history, while returning to Italy, France, and England deepened prior understanding. These experiences enriched the context for understanding vocational education systems within their cultural settings. The Fellowship also provided the opportunity to improve proficiency in French and Italian, enhancing both personal enrichment and the ability to engage more fully in international dialogue.

In addition to professional and cultural enrichment, the Fellowship offered an unexpectedly personal dimension. When intended interviews in the UK failed to materialise, an opportunity arose to visit the Scottish Highlands, the Fellow's place of ancestral origin. Having grown up in Dunedin, New Zealand, with its strong Scottish heritage, the uncanny sense of familiarity and belonging in walking the streets of Inverness and Edinburgh – despite never having been there – was overwhelming. This experience brought a profound connection between personal history and the broader journey of the Fellowship.

Similarly, an opportunity presented itself to stop in Istanbul on the homeward journey. Visiting this vibrant city emerged as one of the trip's great highlights.

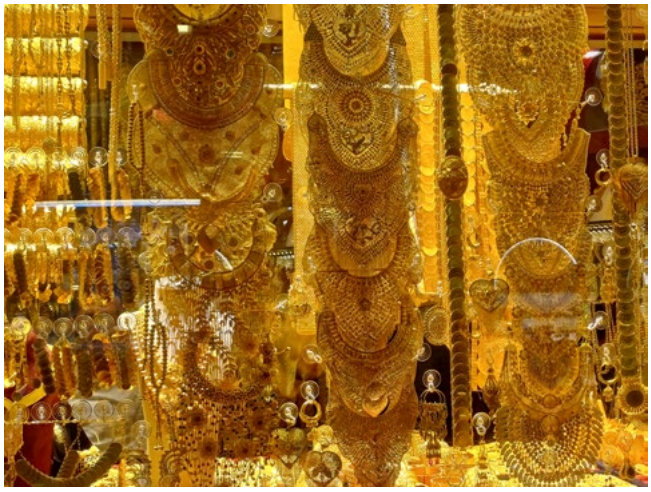

Figure 10. Grand Bazaar, Istanbul, Türkiye

Professionally

Professionally, the Fellowship has clarified understandings of vocational excellence, shifting it from an ill-defined and abstract concept to one that is tangible and actionable. These understandings are now informing conversations with colleagues.

The Fellowship has significantly expanded networks and expertise. It has enabled the building of new international connections with VET practitioners and policy workers, as well as strengthening existing professional relationships. These connections generate potential opportunities for collaboration and comparative research.

The Fellowship has also enhanced professional expertise within the field of vocational education, opening pathways for additional publications in both academic and professional outlets, as well as potential consulting opportunities. The knowledge and credibility gained through this research is likely to provide a strong foundation for further contributions to the national and international conversations on vocational excellence.

Organisationally

For William Angliss Institute, the Fellowship has created both immediate and longer-term impacts. The research findings contribute directly to WAI's considerations of applying to become a TAFE Centre of Excellence, as well as its current uplift of the strategic plan. Early dissemination of the findings has started within the organisation and will continue in different forums.

Beyond this, WAI's reputation will be enhanced through the expertise gained in CoVEs, positioning the Institute as a thought leader in this emerging field. This reputation creates scope not only for WAI's own development but also for providing consulting support to other providers considering the Centre of Excellence pathway.

Broader VET Sector

At sector level, the Fellowship will fill a major knowledge gap by providing practical, policy and contextual information about international models of CoVEs. This has immediate relevance for Australian policy development and has already responded to research questions raised by personnel in the Victorian public service. The findings offer Australian providers and their partners clear, evidence-based insights into the establishment, purpose and role of CoVEs, their partnerships and governance arrangements, how they engage with industry and local skills ecosystems, and importantly, what is meant by 'excellence'. Detailed sections in the report on the implications for Australian VET interpret these findings for Australian practitioners and policy makers. Dissemination across conferences, networks, and publications (outlined below) will ensure these insights are shared widely, benefiting both existing TAFE Centres of Excellence and providers aspiring to this role.

At this stage there are no recorded changes in policy or methodology resulting directly from dissemination, though these are anticipated as findings are more widely shared and the implications considered. The report itself and associated dissemination activities represent a significant development: they create the foundation for future initiatives, including the possibility of a pilot Centre of Excellence informed specifically by international practice. Planned activity includes further dissemination, consultation with stakeholders, and exploration of opportunities to embed the Fellowship insights into both organisational practice at WAI and policy dialogue at state and national levels.

07

Sector Engagement (Dissemination)

A priority following this Fellowship is to ensure that insights are shared widely and constructively across the Australian VET sector. This will be pursued through a deliberate engagement strategy that reaches policymakers, providers, practitioners, and existing Centres of Excellence.

Dissemination will occur through sector events and publications. Presentations are planned for AVETRA OctoberVET 2025, the 2026 AVETRA Conference, with the Fellow being open to forums such as VDC Thought Leaders, and TDA's TAFETalks. Articles will also be prepared for both professional and academic outlets, including *Research Today* and the *International Journal of Training Research*, ensuring accessibility and scholarly credibility. The report itself will be circulated directly to TAFE Centres of Excellence.

The Fellowship provides an opportunity to contribute to policy dialogue. Findings will extend ongoing conversations with the Victorian Skills Authority and the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions. These exchanges aim to inform policy frameworks, evaluation approaches, and funding models, while collaboration with providers will help translate findings into practical strategies.

Importantly, engagement will emphasise two-way dialogue. The Fellow will remain available for consultation with institutions and agencies seeking to apply international lessons, encouraging shared ownership of challenges and opportunities. This collaborative approach reflects the ethos of CoVEs themselves—where collective effort, mutual learning, and system-level thinking drive sustainable impact.

08
Conclusion

This Fellowship has demonstrated that CoVEs are not a single model but a family of approaches shaped by policy frameworks, funding instruments, regional socio-economic factors and industry needs. Despite their diversity, common elements emerged: strong, trust-based partnerships; embeddedness in regional ecosystems; clear value to industry and learners; deliberate approaches to pedagogy and credentials; and robust evaluation mechanisms. These elements combine to create learning ecosystems that are agile, innovative, and sustainable.

For Australia, the lessons are twofold. At a system level, government policy and funding levers must enable the long-term partnerships and innovation cycles that underpin excellence. At a provider level, TAFE Centres of Excellence must nurture a culture that embraces partnership, learner-centred pedagogy, and continuous improvement in a drive towards system transformation. The experience of European and New Zealand CoVEs shows that these goals are achievable, but they require coordinated effort and a shift from compliance-driven practice to future-oriented strategy.

The Fellowship also highlights that CoVEs are more than technical training hubs. They act as catalysts for regional development, talent pipelines, and innovation diffusion across sectors. In an Australian context, this opens pathways for VET to play a stronger role in addressing national and state priorities—from digital transformation and sustainability to workforce resilience and community inclusion.

Moving forward, three priorities stand out. First, establish national and state frameworks that signal clear expectations of excellence while allowing for regional adaptation. Second, support providers to invest in authentic partnerships with industry, other VET providers, higher education, and community stakeholders, where ownership and accountability is shared. In the contested training market in Victoria, this requires a new mindset that embraces collaboration with competitors to uplift the whole sector. Third, invest in evaluation capacity, ensuring that claims of excellence are evidenced, improvements are guided by data, and long-term impact is tracked.

By adopting these insights, Australia has the opportunity not only to adapt international models but to develop a uniquely Australian approach to vocational excellence—one that strengthens the VET sector, responds to industry needs, and delivers lasting benefits for learners and communities.

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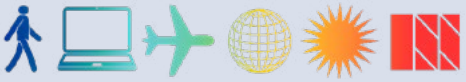


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