

# PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS IN EDUCATION: ERASMUS CENTRES OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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## ABSTRACT

In this discussion paper, we describe the recent development of Erasmus Centres of Vocational Excellence, discuss how these public-private partnerships are crucial in co-creating activities like Lifelong Learning in a holistic way and share some of the lessons learned from the pilot Centres of Vocational Excellence.

## PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS: THE WAY FORWARD?

It only takes a quick look at recent policy documents from the European Commission to realize that we are facing major societal and economic challenges. These challenges, ranging from transforming into a sustainable and climate-neutral economy (EC Green deal, 2019), to recovering from the COVID-19 crisis (EC RFF, 2021) and enhancing and future-proofing Europe's competitiveness (EC European Digital Strategy, 2020) all have a great sense of urgency. What they also have in common is the need for skilled, well trained professionals in order to meet these challenges head on. This is interesting, especially since we are also facing the demographic development of an ageing workforce.

In 2020 the European Commission outlined the human capital ambitions of the EU for the years to come in the 'European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience', defining twelve actions to meet those ambitions. These actions encompass all educational sectors and make quite clear that major joined-up efforts from all stakeholders, public and private, are needed. The challenges we face are simply too big and too complex to be addressed by a single actor or sector (EC Pact for Skills, 2020). Therefore, public-private partnerships play a pivotal role as an organizing mechanism between companies, educators and governmental organizations.

These combined efforts are supported by the European Commission, for instance through the new Erasmus programme with the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). In 2019 and 2020 twelve pilot CoVEs were established, exploring the concept of public-private partnerships as a driver for change in their respective skills ecosystems. In this paper, I will 1. briefly describe the concept of the CoVEs; 2. have a look at the activities that companies, schools and regional authorities typically develop in these Centres, 3. and go into the question of how to organize these kinds of partnerships and ensure sustainability, based on the lessons learned in the pilots.

Although the CoVEs itself are new in the Erasmus programme, there is ample experience with the concept of public-private partnerships in (VET) education across Europe, as described in the Mapping of Centres of Vocational Excellence publication by the European

Commission (2019). The Basque region notably has a strong tradition of close and flexible collaboration between schools and companies. In the Netherlands over 350 public-private partnerships were developed over the last decade, sharing their best practices, lessons learned and knowledge through the open source *We are Katapult* network.

For this article, I also drew from this previous experience, based on policy evaluations (van der Touw, 2013) and peer reviews of individual public-private partnerships using the model for public private partnerships in VET (We are Katapult, 2020). Furthermore, the project leaders of the pilot CoVEs meet regularly in a Community of Practice to discuss the development of their projects. Although these meetings are not an official evaluation, some of the insights below are based on those discussions.

## **CENTRES OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE: WHAT ARE THEY AND WHAT TO DO WITH THEM?**

Before going into the detail of the CoVEs, it is important to clarify the scope of these Centres. The Erasmus CoVEs focus on work-based learning experiences and on EQF level 3-5. However, that does not mean that these Centres are limited to these levels. In the majority of the pilot projects, which are plotted on an interactive map on [www.wearekatapult.eu](http://www.wearekatapult.eu), universities and universities of applied science are important actors in the regional skills ecosystem, working closely with other education providers like VET schools and employers in their respective sector and region. A similar image arises from the Katapult Impact study (2019), assessing the 350+ public-private partnerships in the Netherlands.

The CoVEs, as other forms of public-private partnerships, are organizational instruments that aim to transform the way in which we develop and organize education and training. All too often, education providers have only limited connections with employers and the companies where their graduates will pursue their careers. The Centres aim to bring employers, educators and regional governments in a specific skills ecosystem closer together on a structural basis. These partners collaborate in developing a *common* needs analysis and strategy for their region and sector. Therefore, each region participating in a CoVE needs to have at least one educational institution and one business representative participating in the project. In the Netherlands, a typical public-private partnership involves about 30 companies, 50 teachers and 400-600 students (Katapult, 2019).

In addition to the regional collaboration in a CoVE, the Erasmus projects connect Centres in multiple countries with each other, based on a shared sector like Urban Greening (see the EPLUG project), or a similar approach to transversal issues like inclusion or digitalization (see DIHUB project). The idea behind these platforms of CoVEs is to exchange knowledge across Europe, sharing facilities and forming clusters, thus creating state of the art points of reference for the chosen sector.

## **SIX BUILDING BLOCKS OF ACTIVITIES FOR PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS**

When looking at the activities developed in the CoVEs, there is not really a limit on what can be done (Erasmus Programme Guide, 2021). Nevertheless, when taking a step back, six categories of activities, or building blocks, can be distinguished (Katapult, 2019):

- **Improving curriculum and recruitment:** this building block focuses on improving the quality of the curriculum by redesigning courses together with businesses to keep the curriculum up to date. Apart from the content, the focus can also be on the method of teaching, for example, by offering classes in real life situations or on site.

The underlying goal of these activities is to increase the intake in a sector and to make sure there are sufficient, well trained employees available.

- **Lifelong Learning:** these activities focus on the reskilling and upskilling of workers, and can range from modular courses offering micro credentials to full degree programmes.
- **Network building:** public-private activities are simply not possible without having a network in your skills ecosystem. Developing a sustainable network in which all partners trust each other, have insight into each other's needs and have shared ambitions is a precondition for the other building blocks.
- **Shared infrastructure:** in this building block, the partners are sharing physical infrastructure, for instance installations that education partners can use for training students during the day, and provide lifelong learning courses to companies in the evening.
- **Applied Research:** in many sectors knowledge develops so quickly it is hard to keep up. Through public-private partnerships, the latest knowledge can be applied in practice and transferred to companies. The TKgune initiative in the Basque region is an inspiring example of how a public-private partnership can facilitate applied research.
- **Professional innovation:** activities in this building block are focused on innovating as part of the daily core practice of companies. Especially for SMEs without the means to do this by themselves, it can be interesting to innovate through the public-private partnership. (NL Digital, 2020).

Depending on the needs in the region, a public-private partnership can focus on combinations of these building blocks. The public-private partnership allows for a holistic approach to collaboration between educators and other stakeholders in the skills ecosystem.

### Lessons learned: how to successfully set up public-private partnerships

After looking at the possible activities in the CoVEs, the next question that arises is: how to organize all this? Based on the discussions by the project leaders of the pilot CoVEs in their Community of Practice and evaluations of public-private partnerships in the Netherlands (van der Touw, 2013; Groot Beumer *et al.*, 2020; Katapult, 2019 & 2020), the following lessons can be drawn:

1. **Co-ownership is key.** Naturally, educational institutions, companies and governmental organizations are different, but in the public-private partnership they need to be equal. Each organization needs to be committed and involved in order to build a sustainable network that will last after the subsidy period. In the Dutch context, co-funding from all partners, either in cash or in kind, proved to be key to ensure the commitment of all partners. Without the co-ownership, the cocreation of the activities becomes rather difficult (Groot Beumer *et al.*, 2020).
2. **Work on a needs basis** and focus on making an impact for the stakeholders of the public-private partnerships. As Hans de Jong, CEO of Phillips and closely involved in public private partnerships, put it: *“you shouldn't impose a top down solution because that goes against the will of the people. It is precisely this bottom-up power that is the formula for success”* (Katapult, 2019, p. 12). The regional needs analysis will provide a good starting point for the partnership, and by focusing on the impact on students and/or companies from partnership activities, tangible successes are likely - successes which need to be communicated, promoted and celebrated, and which will in turn attract other partners.
3. **Start (small)!** The biggest recommendation that the project leader of the PoVE Water, an individual very experienced in public-private partnerships, had for the other

Centres of Vocational Excellence Water in his project was to start having cups of coffee with their stakeholders to establish warm relations and listen to their needs. Based on this input they can start taking short sprints - with continuous feedback loops - to develop activities. The structure and governance will fall into place as a consequence, fitting the needs of the specific partnership.

4. **Focus on problem solving behaviour.** In his analysis of 10 years of public-private partnerships in Dutch vocational education, P.F. Moerman (2020) identifies problem solving behaviour in public-private partnerships as a critical aspect for success, in contrast to sticking rigidly to the predefined plan and focusing obsessively on ticking all the boxes.
5. **Take your time and develop a good business case.** Rome was not built in a day, and neither is a CoVE. Getting to know all stakeholders well, preparing a proper needs analysis and developing relevant activities together takes time! There is a good chance some activities will fail, or will simply seem less relevant as overall plans develop and mature, and it is important to have time to reflect on these and to put the lessons learned to good use. Based on these experiences, partners will need to develop a sound business case for the partnership, structuring the costs and detailing how these costs will be met. The successful and financially sustainable public-private partnerships in the Netherlands typically needed at least four years to get to that point (Groot Beumer *et al.*, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The development of the CoVEs has just started, but given the results of other public-private partnerships throughout Europe, it seems to be a promising development. The holistic approach, crossing organizational boundaries both within the education sector and between education and businesses, can lead to a warm and long-term partnership between all stakeholders in the skills ecosystem. Creating this type of warm and structurally solid partnership can provide the groundwork for many different activities, including Lifelong Learning.

The development of CoVEs is by no means an easy task, nor are CoVEs a silver bullet solution to all the challenges we are facing. However, the alternative of continuing to work in our own silos in business, schools and governmental organizations is simply not an option. We will have to do something if we want to succeed in overcoming the challenges we are facing, and CoVEs have the potential to address many of these issues. In the end the proof of the pudding is in the eating, but the Centres of Vocational Excellence are definitely worthwhile for all involved in (higher) education to at least keep an eye on, or even better, to get involved in.

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- Platform of Vocational Excellence Water: [www.povewater.eu](http://www.povewater.eu)

#### Websites

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