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# **SUMMARY REPORT OF THE ROUNDTABLE EVENT**

## **ROUNDTABLE CENTERS OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE: BRIDGING INNOVATION, EDUCATION, AND INDUSTRY ACROSS BORDERS**

**12-13 MARCH 2025  
WARSAW, RADOM**

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# I. Introduction

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**A roundtable event was held in Warsaw on 12-13<sup>th</sup> March 2025 on the “Centres of Vocational Excellence: bridging innovation, education, and industry across borders”. On the first day a roundtable discussion took place, and on the second day, a study visit was organized, and participants visited two Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE’s) in Radom. The event brought together 39 high-level VET experts and practitioners from Iceland, Norway and Poland.**

The development of vocational education and training (VET) systems is essential for fostering innovation, workforce readiness, and bridging gaps between school education, higher education, and industry needs through the "knowledge triangle". Centres of Vocational Excellence can play a central role in this modernization by serving as hubs of innovation and sector-specific expertise, aligning training with technological advancements and labour market demands.

**The purpose of the roundtable was to:**


- Explore and compare national approaches to CoVE’s in Poland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein.
- Strengthen collaboration between countries by sharing knowledge, best practices, and innovations in VET systems.
- Understand the role of industries within CoVEs in certifying qualifications and ensuring alignment with labour market needs.
- Facilitate cross-border networking of CoVEs, focusing on thematic collaboration and knowledge exchange.
- Develop practical conclusions / recommendations tailored to the socio-economic contexts of each participating country to enhance the effectiveness of VET systems.

The report provides a summary of the discussion at the Warsaw meeting and the conclusions of the meeting.

## II. Summary of the roundtable event

The event was opened by welcome and greeting by representatives of the Polish government and ministries: Mr. Henryk Kiepus, Secretary of State in the Ministry of National Education and Mr. Konrad Wojnarowski, Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy as well as Ms. Margunn Instefjord from the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills in Norway, representing the Donor Programme Partner from Norway. The opening was concluded by Ms. Alina Prochasek, member of the board of the host organization, the Foundation for the Development of the Education System.

The opening and welcome session was followed by presentations on the development of CoVE's in Poland by Ms. Alina Prochasek and Ms. Beata Dziemińska-Skowron from the Vocational Education Department in the Ministry of National Education. The presentations highlighted the establishment of *Branżowe Centra Umiejętności*, translated as Sectoral Skills Centres (SSC's) in Poland as an element of a wider VET system reform of 2019 and the currently ongoing establishment of a nationwide network of 120 SSC's. As of March 2025 Sectoral Skills Centres for 22 industries / sectors have already been legally established. The remaining ones are on various stages of development - many of them already operational, however not yet incorporated legally in the VET system - Ms Dziemińska-Skowron explained. The Foundation for the Development of the Education System has been tasked with tendering projects and distribution of public funds supporting establishment/development of CoVE's by consortia of public and private entities representing i.a. chambers of industry, employers organizations, companies, training centres and schools - informed Ms. Alina Prochasek. The Polish SSC's remain diverse and can provide varied services, as presented on the slide below:


Ministry of National Education  
Republic of Poland

### Areas of SSCs' activities

<div style="background-color: #4f81bd; color: white; text-align: center; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <b>Area I</b>  <b>VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING</b> </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provision of education and training facilities,</li> <li>Conducting courses and practical training for students including people with disabilities;</li> <li>Upskilling /reskilling of adults;</li> <li>Staff sectoral training;</li> <li>Examinations and validation of sectoral qualifications;</li> <li>Sectoral certificates</li> </ul>	<div style="background-color: #4f81bd; color: white; text-align: center; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <b>Area II</b>  <b>INTEGRATION AND SUPPORT</b> </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integration of business with VET education at all levels (IVET, CVET) and HE partners;</li> <li>Mediation in establishing cooperation between VET stakeholders</li> </ul>
<div style="background-color: #4f81bd; color: white; text-align: center; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <b>Area III</b>  <b>INNOVATION AND DEVELOPMENT</b> </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transfer of knowledge and know-how,</li> <li>Dissemination of modern technologies and innovative solutions;</li> <li>Supporting innovation in VET;</li> <li>Analysing the demand for skills and occupations;</li> </ul>	<div style="background-color: #4f81bd; color: white; text-align: center; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <b>Area IV</b>  <b>PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING AND PROMOTION</b> </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support for career guidance;</li> <li>Preparing to enter and return to labour market;</li> <li>Promoting the attractiveness of VET</li> </ul>

source: Ministry of National Education Poland.

The introductory lecture “CoVEs in Europe – policy, practice and challenges” by dr Horacy Dębowski - a member of the EQF Advisory Group and the vice-director of the Central Examination Board shifted the focus away from Poland. This introduction set the stage, presenting the various economic and policy contexts for developing CoVE's and VET in general. Some of the main points raised, which were later discussed were about CoVE's relation to:

- the challenges of competitiveness and the middle income trap;
- higher education, innovativeness and employment;
- migrations and demographic decline in Europe;
- green and digital transformations;
- VET enrolment rates and VET attractiveness (including statistics by sex);
- the impact of military industry development;
- the role of the state in skills development.

The following roundtable sessions, were realized in the order planned (see agenda in Annex 1). Each session began with a short presentation / presentations of selected cases brought by participants and was followed by an open discussion. It needs to be noted, however, that the discussions often transversed the topics. The following summary presents the key threads, digressions and conclusions in an ordered manner.

## Session 1. VET as the knowledge triangle

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Policy documents state that the cooperation between VET institutions, higher education, research and business stakeholders is necessary for building a skills ecosystems which provide adequate, up-to-date skills and high quality training. The knowledge triangles are seen as settings that allow for various benefits / spillovers, such as updating programmes and qualifications or developing new ones, introducing innovations in teaching and learning, improving the link between employers and learners, developing transferable skills in the workplaces etc.

These assumptions have not been criticized in the discussion, instead an exchange of practical experience and dilemmas have been shared - showing that it is not the goal that is debatable, but the road leading to it. One of the first voices in the discussion has indicated, that the VET systems are embedded in various context - historical, economic, political and other, which makes each of them an independent puzzle, which needs to be solved locally and in dialogue, sometimes, unavoidably, by trial and error. More specifically, it has been pointed out that the role of the tripartite organizations, involvement of industry chambers in policy-making and, consequently, the role of state vary significantly. The cases of Norway and Iceland in this regard are completely different from the Polish industry relations. Nevertheless, the stakeholders groups interests do not differ as much - the main difference lies in involvement, impact and capacities. Learning about the government interventions, the industry involvement and their relations fuelled the first round of discussions.

The introductory presentation by Mr. Jonny Pettersen, the Development Manager at Fagskolen i Viken (Norway) showed how a network of VET institutions create a Higher Vocational College and expanded their activities over time, including a centre for didactic innovations, developing

cooperation with employers and introduction of new technologies to teaching and learning. The presentation highlighted a set of relevant issues:

- the rising number of enrolment in HVET programmes and the potential competition between VET and HEI's for students;
- the role of tripartite organizations in coordination and supporting development of new VET programmes;
- the internationalization aspect of VET (international networking of CoVE's);
- the development of digital courses and new methods of teaching and learning in companies (in the Experiential Learning Centre)

**Furthermore, the discussion has shown that:**

- although the involvement of various partners is key in the public provision of VET it often comes at a price: the time needed to define goals and process programmes through the relevant bodies;
- private providers can react faster and be more elastic (provide shorter courses), yet issues related to public spending control and quality assurance in VET need to be addressed;
- cooperation between VET and higher education institutions (HEI's) is difficult in practice, since, to put it mildly, their interests may not be aligned (e.g. competition for students and funding, diverging goals);
- international cooperation provides multiple benefits for both students and staff (teachers, trainers, administrative), however the language remains a barrier - both students and staff have limitations. An example of on-line courses provided in an international VET network have shown, how it can be a great advantage to develop the offer and didactic skills, but demands developing multilingual (or English) materials.

## Session 2. Industry credentials and qualifications in CoVE's

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In this session the cases of **Iceland** and **Poland** were presented.

The Icelandic IDAN Training Centre was presented by Ms. Hulda Kjærnested Baldursdóttir – Expert in Education and Human Resources, Icelandic Federation of Industry and the Chair of the Board of IDAN. Which was followed by a presentation of the pathway of obtaining qualifications with validation of prior learning by Irena Halina Kołodziej – validation advisor at IDAN Education Centre, presented IDAN and the case of validation of prior learning.

Mr. Lech Boguta – the Head of the Integrated Qualifications System Department at the Ministry of National Education, presented the Integrated Qualifications System and the sectoral qualifications in Poland.

**The presentations highlighted the following issues:**

- development of new types of qualifications and embedding them into qualifications systems;
- practical requirements for qualifications and credentials, such as safety requirements, timely delivery and public recognition;
- availability and accessibility of qualifications - by offering them to the public at reasonable prices and in ways adjusted to learners' life situations;
- relevance of tools for recognition of credentials and their limits (hours/ points / learning outcomes);
- recognition of prior learning as a way for easing transition to another labour market and shortening the training time;
- role of skills assessments as a final confirmation of readiness for work.

The discussion about qualifications and credentials has been triggered early on by the contexts of EQF, ECTS and ECVET brought in the introductory lecture. The discussion revealed that there is a need for mechanisms of recognition and comparison of credits and qualifications, such as the ones working in the European Higher Education Area. **However, it has been pointed out that VET is a very different area of skills and credentialling for numerous reasons, such as:**

- the responsibility linked with recognition decisions related to health and safety of clients / recipients or the general public on one hand, and the differences in occupational requirements / practice between countries on the other;
- lack of harmonization of skills, training and qualifications in VET between countries - to some extent contrary to HE education on 6th and 7th levels of EQF (Bachelor and Master's degrees). Even the Master in Crafts qualifications have significant differences between countries;
- the context of learning and the modes of training provision are very diverse in VET, making it difficult to define a typical learner, typical learning conditions etc. This renders the concept of 'notional learning hours' almost impossible to use. An agreement to use more abstract 'points' could settle the arguments, however it would have to be a political decision - not a technical one.

- there is little agreement on how quality of training and qualifications in VET can translate between contexts and borders. The institutional landscapes, provision modes and qualifications types differ so much it renders the comparison of approaches of quality assurance at least equally difficult a task, as comparing the qualifications.
- There is little agreement on universal and high level transversal skills in VET in Europe (such as 'critical thinking' or 'solving engineering problems' in HE). However, it has been also noted that the Master in Craft's case as well as the EQF levels descriptors are significant achievements and reference points for this problem.

**The participants have agreed strongly, that there is a need for a more universal credential type, which could be a brand, a recognizable name across Europe and increase attractiveness of VET:**

- this credential type could be linked with CoVE's and their (future) international cooperations. In some industries (off-shore) attempts in this regard have already been commenced;
- some voices indicated that perhaps a harmonization of basic/ fundamental skills is necessary, or that a general profile of competence could be distinguished.
- [This discussion was linked to conclusions and experiences of ECVET initiatives in Europe]

In the last session, Ms. Hulda Baldursdóttir has also shown an example of cooperation of various stakeholders and institutions during a crisis situation: a volcanic eruption. This case has shown that in a case of a limited or dispersed population, intersectoral or wide-profile qualifications will rise in importance, and may even become indispensable. This was a noteworthy example of combining various skills and knowledge from areas that may exist far apart in other countries.

## Session 3. Networking in Centers of Vocational Excellence

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Centres of Vocational Excellence are networks in various dimensions. They provide an institutional framework for partners to realize joint initiatives, for example by creating training centres, which are *de facto* networks of partners, but with a formalized status. They enable development of cooperation of schools and industry partners and new forms of provision, counselling and skills development. CoVE's also create an interpersonal space for creating networks of colleagues, partners and making friendships, which are necessary for building healthy and effective skills ecosystems. Finally, the CoVE's provide a potential to create an international networks (network of networks) - in this regard they can be seen as actors or accelerators of the networking processes, similar to the skills alliances initiatives and various networks of VET institutions and experts (EVTA, NETinVET, VETNET, Nordic Network for Adult Education etc.).

In this session, again, critical dependencies surfaced: networking will depend on the local / regional / sectoral dynamics as well as on the national contexts. The presented cases have shown examples of CoVEs that are 'purpose built' or act as designated entities as part of national/regional arrangements for vocational excellence (the Polish initiatives of SSC's) and those CoVE's that are organically developed and act as VET providers, functioning as networks for a region or a sector (the Icelandic IDAN). But also cases, which developed in a mixed way - such as the Norwegian Fagskolen i Viken or the East Automotive Alliance in Poland.

The first presentation, by Ms. Hulda Kjærnested Baldursdóttir, Expert in Education and Human Resources from the Icelandic Federation of Industry referred to the previous presentation of IDAN centre (created by combining multiple training providers into one centre) and by highlighting the relevance of individual networking in the specific conditions of Iceland. Here again the VET system, and the CoVE's in particular, have been shown as an element of socially embedded organizations - cooperating within the bounds of industry organizations, society and the state.

The second presentation by Mr Jacek Kuśmierczyk, The chairman of The Polish Chamber of Printing discussed examples of solutions and networking cooperation within the project created by his Chamber of SSCs. The expose brought a leading perspective of seeking global benefits of cooperation and networking and the need for finding a way to share the sometimes uneven costs and risks (also by networking). Mr Kuśmierczyk presented the challenges faced by his organization, but also those faced by their partners: the demographic decline and workforce deficits, the limitations of business in training (and sometimes myopia), the migrations and the sex ratios in VET.

The discussion on networking and the challenges pivoted to putting a special focus on the internationalization, and led to a proposal of creating vocational training centres outside of Europe - we need a skilled migration, and if that comes at a price of training workforce also for the host countries - it is a fair deal for both sides, Mr Kuśmierczyk said.

During the session there has been an additional contribution by Mr Ryszard Jania, who has presented the results of networking in the East Automotive Alliance. He presented an example of a nexus of projects and initiatives led by the business community and public sector hand-in-hand, which

involved companies cooperation with schools and vocational education centres. The entire activity was coordinated by a regional sector organization, which created a communication platform for private and public entities. The activity was focused on the effective and qualitative implementation of internships and student training in companies, creating dedicated and original internship programs and standards for ensuring the quality of practical vocational training.

**The key points related to the topic of networking were:**

- the need to coordinate training actions between private and public providers - it has been mentioned that adults (workers, unemployed or otherwise active lifelong learners) as well as employers need an aggregated 'menu' of training offers and qualifications that is quality assured;
- networking and information management are both necessary to know the 'where', 'how' and 'what' in training and development of skills. It has been stated, that only in cooperation a joint understanding of skills and qualifications can be developed;
- individual relations are created in concrete situations - places such as CoVE's. To this end not just training and developing excellence, but also sharing of insights (e.g. labour market and skills intelligence), business networking and organizing conferences or congresses are important;
- international networking, especially in sectoral dimension, is a necessity for developing excellence [here the examples of staff exchanges and joint course development from Fagskolen i Viken (Norway) can be seen as a good practice].
- a list of CoVE's in Europe should further be developed, such as the Erasmus+ funded CoVE's list or the Polish list of SSC's<sup>1</sup>, could be a useful resource for sharing. However, it has been noted that centres of excellence predate the term 'CoVE's' and the EU policy and do not necessarily have a formal status of being one, therefore, developing such a list would require a careful selection on specified criteria. Additionally, there is no generally accepted taxonomy of sectors - internationally or even nationally. Even taking this into account, developing and sharing such resources could be beneficial for supporting networking.

The debate concluded by indicating the need to build bridges between private and public sector stakeholders. In order to achieve high-quality competences, agreements should be built on **cooperation in creating and implementing original practical vocational training programs**. Solutions should be implemented in the field of supervision standards for the quality of acquired skills. By building common agreements between enterprises, employer organizations and public entities, we can achieve greater flexibility in the system of acquiring qualifications.

At the end of this session, participants agreed to exchange contacts for the sake of networking and exploring cooperation opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/skills-jobs/centres-vocational-excellence\\_en](https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/skills-jobs/centres-vocational-excellence_en), <https://www.copcov.es/>, <https://www.frse.org.pl/kpo-bcu-map>

## III. Conclusions

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The roundtable event provided a set of general conclusions for developing Centres of Vocational Excellence as means to improve training systems and workforce development. While recognizing the differences between countries, the participants agreed that successful CoVE's require:

- strong industry and public partners for assuring coordination;
- close cooperation of public and private training providers;
- sectoral cooperation and networking, both nationally and internationally (between centres);
- a supporting set of national institutions and policy instruments, which facilitate relevant processes such as skills and qualifications development and recognition, access to information and funding or networking;
- being embedded in skills ecosystems, but also nurturing one within their own bounds.

**These general conclusions translate to concrete recommendations that can be implemented in a national or international context:**

- CoVE's should provide (also) higher level and (in every case) high status qualifications, which may require developing new types of credentials;
- CoVE's should develop a positioning strategy for personal and professional development to effectively cooperate (and sometimes compete) with higher education institutions;
- to further improve the status of VET institutions and professionals, CoVE's could for example: support preparation for and the organization of skills competitions, actively cooperate with local institutions - for example by involvement in research & development endeavours or by supporting the image of VET professionals as first responders.
- developing a public list of CoVE's for enhancing networking processes;
- aggregating information about skills development, counselling, training, assessment, qualifications recognition and other services offered by CoVE's and making it accessible;
- internationalization of CoVE's should be seen as a necessary stage in development of excellence and supported via a dedicated funding mechanism.

**Specific recommendations have been formulated by the participants, which refer to national settings and needs:**

- [PL] Tools and systems for an elastic development of qualifications and competences for sectors need to be strengthened. SSC's are an example of this, but require a wider support system, including funding and institutional arrangements traversing the ministerial divides.
- [PL] The Integrated Qualifications Register (Zintegrowany Rejestr Kwalifikacji) and Database for Development Services (Baza Usług Rozwojowych) should further be integrated with SSC's development.
- [IS] A system of recognition of qualifications should be further developed and supplemented by a system for attaining smaller units / modules related to specific requirements related to Iceland's specific environmental and safety requirements.
- [IS] Developing international cooperation within VET centres could be used to improve national skills system.
- [NO] There is a need to coordinate private and public training offer. Some skills needs require a prompt reaction, which is difficult to cater within a lengthy public consultations process

(and sometimes also a lengthy training period). There is a need for a more diversified and accessible training offer.

- [NO] Attracting women to many VET professions should be made a priority because of the deficits in the workforce.
- [NO] CoVE's activities (and VET in general) should be seen as at least complementary to (or even an element of) active employment policies: the high economic and social costs related to increasing percentage of NEET's is a justification for increased funding of VET training and (at least partially) publicly financed workplace training and workplacements.

Last but not least, dr Wojciech Stęchły, the moderator of the event concluded by stating that, it would be beneficial to discuss the challenges and needs for CoVE's development in the sectoral contexts. A roundtable event dedicated to developing CoVE's in selected, crucial sectors could be organized to further network and formulate more specific recommendations. Such an initiative would allow for a more homogeneous composition of participants and discussion centred around common challenges.

#### **IV. Annexes:**

## Annex 1. Meeting Agenda

### ROUNDTABLE CENTERS OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE: BRIDGING INNOVATION, EDUCATION, AND INDUSTRY ACROSS BORDERS

12-13 MARCH 2025 | WARSAW, RADOM

#### AGENDA

**Day 1 | March 12, 2025 | Mercure Warszawa Centrum**

**08:30 - 9:00** Registration and morning coffee

**09:00 - 09:30** Opening remarks and agenda overview

- Welcome by organizers
- Setting the stage for roundtable discussion: "BCU (COVE) as a platform for cooperation between industry and VET for sectors"

**09:30 - 10:00** Introductory lecture: COVEs in Europe - policy, practice and challenges

**10:00 - 11:30** Session 1 - VET as the knowledge triangle

- Presentation: Raising the status and development of higher VET programs - COVEs in Norway
- Table discussion
- Summary of table discussion by rapporteurs

**11:30 - 12:00** Coffee break

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## AGENDA

**12:00 - 13:30**

### **Session 2 - Industry credentials and qualifications in COVEs / The role of industries within CoVE in certifying qualifications**

- Presentation: Skills assessment and recognition of credentials and qualifications
- Table discussion
- Summary of table discussion by rapporteurs

**13:30 - 14:30**

### **Lunch break**

**14:30 - 16:00**

### **Session 3 - Networking in Centers of Vocational Excellence**

- Presentations: Networking employers and industry around COVE in Institution in Country
- Table discussion
- Summary of table discussion by rapporteurs

**16:00 - 16:30**

### **Coffee break**

**16:30 - 17:00**

### **Summary and closing**

- Feedback / surveys
- Logistical information about day 2

**19:00**

### **Dinner and informal evening networking**

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### AGENDA

#### Day 2 | March 13, 2025

**08:00 - 09:00** Breakfast and preparation for morning activities

**09:00 - 11:00** Transport to Radom

**11:00 - 14:30** Study Visit in COVE in Radom

- Centre for Vocational Excellence No.1 for the Construction Industry in the Field of Finishing Works)
- Centre of Vocational Excellence No.2 in Radom for the electronics and mechatronics sector in the field of industrial automation

**14:30 - 16:30** Return to Warsaw

**16:30** The End

## **Annex 2. Participating Institutions**

1. Borgarholtsskóli
2. Central Examination Board
3. Centre of Vocational Excellence for logistics industry
4. Centre of Vocational Excellence No. 1 in Radom
5. Centre of Vocational Excellence No. 2 in Radom
6. East Automotive Alliance
7. Educational Research Institute - National Research Institute
8. Energy Innovation AS
9. EVET experts / SGH Warsaw School of Economics
10. Fagskolen Viken
11. Fisktækniskóli Íslands (Icelandic College of Fisheries)
12. IDAN fræðslusetur
13. Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych / SGH Warsaw School of Economics
14. LO (Fellesforbundet)
15. Łukasiewicz Research Network - Institute for Sustainable Technologies
16. Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy
17. Ministry of National Education
18. National Tertiary Vocational School Council in Norway
19. Norwegian confederation of trade unions sector EL & ICT
20. Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-dir)
21. Polish Brotherhood of the Knights of Gutenberg
22. Polish Chamber of Automotive Industry
23. Polish Chamber of Printing
24. Rannís, The Icelandic Erasmus+ National Agency
25. The Federation of Icelandic Industries
26. University of Applied Sciences in Elbląg
27. Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

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