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Competing by Cooperating

A practical handbook for establishing and developing a network of networks



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Executive Summary

This publication defines a model for a transnational Network of Networks identifying its key features, core values and benefits. It's a comprehensive, practical handbook illustrated with good practises as illustrative examples. The model is transferable. It supports dissemination to peer VET providers as a means of highlighting best practices and encouraging transnational network creation.

Although it's aimed at networks of initial and continuing VET providers, most aspects can also be applied by a broader audience, including but not limited to universities of applied sciences and polytechnics, research institutions, professional bodies and trade associations, chambers, social partners, social enterprises, national and regional authorities, development agencies, public employment services, and social inclusion organisations.

To establish and further develop meaningful and sustainable networks, we've identified a roadmap, applicable at both regional and international level, with 7 steps:

1. Start with the why of networking. Often, there are 4 drivers to participate in (border-crossing) networks:
 - a. To tap into to innovation, expertise and good practices
 - b. To increase resilience and contribute to the skills ecosystem
 - c. To improve branding and name recognition
 - d. To align with EU policy priorities, and effectively use funding
2. Make it visual and map your network using network metrics. Our metrics to measure and compare different kinds of networks, are based on 2 pillars:
 - a. Network structure metrics
 - b. Relationship quality metrics
3. Identify shared core values and characteristics, and develop a shared vision.
4. Explore the potential for further cooperation. Compare current network with desired network. Decide on a joint strategy for the mid to long term, plus an action plan for the short term (e.g. on annual basis).
5. Decide on the type of cooperation that suits you best. Our decision tree helps selecting the most appropriate form of collaboration, based on the various drivers for networking and the available commitment of people and resources.
6. Run through the continuous improvement cycle. Monitor progress and make changes where necessary.
7. Find inspiration in good practices at every step in the process. This is the best way to stay motivated and continue to actively work on developing and strengthening strategic (transnational) networks.



1. Introduction

This publication is the result of a joint effort by the Network of Networks (NoN), an informal alliance between 5 regional networks of vocational education and training providers in Basque Country, Finland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and the Netherlands.

Internationalisation is no goal in itself; it's a means to an end. This calls for more cooperation on joint themes. Although each regional network is unique in its own regard, they all share an aim to offer an international dimension to education of students and the development of staff. Each network within NoN has the same starting point: the best way to stay competitive and boost innovation, is by cooperating.

Context

The KA3 project “Network of Networks – International Network of VET Providers. A Grassroots Approach”, no. 608977-EPP-1-2019-1-NL-EPPKA3-VET-NETPAR, aims at the creation of an international network of VET providers through a grass roots approach. It responds to the needs of the VET sector in the EU that has to deal with a low image in society and it wants to improve the attractiveness of VET supported by capacity building and the testing and implementation of best practices.

The project, implemented between October 2019 and April 2022, pursued 4 specific objectives:

1. The creation of a transnational network of VET partnerships that already cooperate on a national level.
2. Cross-border cooperation aimed at mutual learning and the exchange of best practices.
3. The implementation of the VET policy agenda by engaging VET leaders.
4. Reaching out other potential networks in order to involve them as critical friends while sharing our own experience for the creation of their own regional, national and international networks.

Proclaimer

We would like to share our lessons learned and hope to inspire you. Since the publication is based on the context of our network of Networks, some of the examples provided may need some translation to be applicable to situations in a different context. Nevertheless, we hope you find them useful. And we're always looking forward to hearing suggestions that we can learn from in turn.



2. Aim of This Handbook: Strategic Network Building

The creation and maintenance of (international) networks take the commitment of valuable yet scarce resources, including time and energy. Rather than investing in ad hoc collaborative relationships, members may be well-advised to think about these collaborations strategically and to manage them by focusing on the quality of the connections between participants rather than the notion that “more is better.”

This handbook is an instrument to establish and maintain a transferrable and strategic international Network of Networks model. It provides a roadmap and helps define the key features, core values and benefits. It incorporates the process steps towards a joint strategy for the mid-long term and short-term action plan. The handbook offers guidance to establish both a regional/national network and an international network of networks. It helps comparing different aspects of different types of networks, and how to set them up strategically. It also supports reaching out to other potential networks.

Premises

Backed up by research and proven practices, our premises include:

- network interactions can increase the capacity of VET providers to deal with education issues, and foster innovation in their field of work.
- different kinds of interactions affect relationship building and network management.
- trust and reciprocity can influence various organizational structures (e.g., hierarchical, bureaucratic).
- organizations cooperate for different reasons and each network partner brings its own agenda.



3. Roadmap towards Cooperating through Networks

You can establish and further develop meaningful and sustainable transnational relationships, using the 7 steps below. The roadmap is applicable at both regional and international level.



Seven Steps

1. Start with the why of networking. What are the main drivers?
2. Make it visual: Map your network using network metrics.
3. Identify shared core values and characteristics, and develop a shared vision.
4. Explore the potential for further cooperation. Compare current network with desired network. Decide on a joint strategy for the mid to long term, plus a joint action plan for the short term (e.g. on annual basis).
5. Decide on the type of cooperation that suits you best. Use the decision tree to select the most appropriate form of collaboration, based on the various motivations (drivers) for networking and the available commitment of people and resources.
6. Run through the continuous improvement cycle. Monitor progress and make changes where necessary.
7. Find inspiration in good practices at every step in the process. This is the best way to stay motivated and continue to actively work on developing and strengthening strategic (transnational) networks. As support, we've added illustrative examples in text frames for each phase of the process.



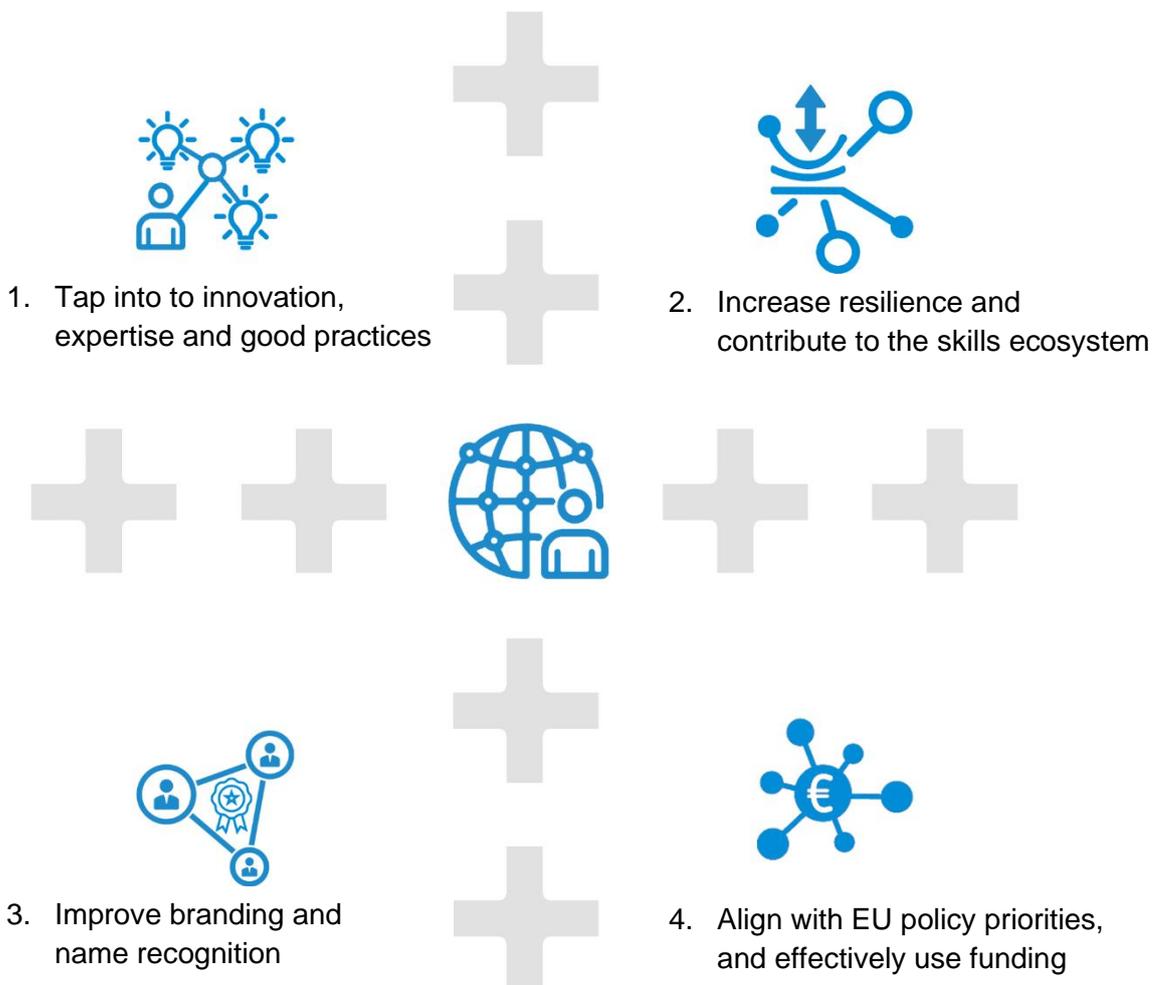
4. Step 1: Start with The Why - Main Drivers for Networking

Why should you cooperate within a network, or with other networks? Often, four main drivers for VET providers to participate in (border-crossing) networks are mentioned, all of which are listed below:

1. To tap into to innovation, expertise and good practices
2. To increase resilience and contribute to the skills ecosystem
3. To improve branding and name recognition
4. To align with EU policy priorities, and use funding more effectively

If you recognize one or more of those reasons / incentives, then networking will add an obvious advantage.

The Four Main Motivations and Incentives for Networking:





Ad 1: Tap into Innovation, Expertise and Good Practices

The first motivation is that networking boosts innovation. Not just technical, but also social innovation, i.e. doing things in a different way. Develop new approaches by tapping in to expertise, lessons learned and good practices from others. And, of course, share your own experience with dos and don'ts so others can benefit too.

Aim for a learning culture in your network. More innovation stimulates teachers and trainers to get creative with new approaches, new solutions and technologies. Collaboration can also open doors to research grants where you benefit from the results as a co-funding partner.

Collaborating with other VET providers brings innovation into your network and gives your current staff opportunities for further professionalization. These are vital steps in future-proofing your organization in a rapidly changing world, and address the transformation challenges.

Illustrative example: How TDA boost professionalizing of staff with impact

Every year, The Dutch Alliance network, organizes an international study trip for affiliated members. These study visits are part of a triptych training course.

First meeting is domestically. On the one hand, to get acquainted, and to inform (daily program and practical matters - from travel insurance to dress code). On the other hand, participants start working directly on their aimed learning outcomes. For example, through assignments.

The second part is the trip abroad, organized in close cooperation with a carefully selected host who has a lot of relevant expertise.

To reach out and increase the impact, all participants also report their findings to their team and supervisor / management after the study tour.

The concluding part of the training triptych is a 'return day'. This usually takes place 2 months after returning home. Here the participants share how they have applied their learning outcomes, addressed challenges, and what impact they have generated. This adds an additional learning loop, where network members tap into innovation, expertise and good practices from others within the TDA network.

By this way of working, TDA has established a support service that facilitates mutual learning for VET, i.e. provision of peer counselling and capacity building to VET stakeholders.



Ad 2: Increase Resilience and Contribute to The Skills Ecosystem

VET systems in Europe, although differing between countries, are transforming fundamentally in a number of ways. They try to enhance their responsiveness to labour market needs to meet structural shifts related to globalisation, technological change (digitalisation) and the need to maintain the competitiveness of European industries. Think of factors like:

- social and demographic changes such as falling birth rates,
- growing competition from new types of providers (e.g. multi-national companies that operate across the world) and new ways of delivering education internationally through e-learning.
- economic changes such as temporary and part-time employment, and cross-border labour flows.
- external 'shocks' like the 2008 economic crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

VET providers like to invest time and energy in networks that help them enhance resilience and contribute to the skills ecosystem. A network that supports the main purposes of VET, will be attractive and valuable to its members. Main purposes of VET include:

- To prepare students for working life in a specific occupation or occupational field
- To combat youth unemployment and/or foster economic growth
- To provide students with the basis to engage in further education
- To promote social inclusion and cohesion
- To foster personal growth and fulfilment
- To prepare students to participate fully in society and to become active citizens

This means networks should focus on core elements such as:

- A. Skills, competences and qualifications for employability, adaptability, personal development and active citizenship.
- B. Accessible, attractive, valued and innovative quality assured provision for all.
- C. Integrated, responsive, diversified and quality assured systems with governance, funding and guidance which foster excellence, inclusion and effectiveness.



Illustrative examples

Here are a few examples of how Network of Networks works on enhancing resilience and contributing to a future-proof skills ecosystem:

4D Entrepreneurship (Dream:Dare:Design:Do)

This Erasmus+ KA2 project aims to develop new, innovative, creative, entrepreneurial education. During the project 42 VET staff and 540 students from 5 different countries will form six Entrepreneurship Clubs and participate in Design Thinking projects aimed at developing. VET students will have the opportunity to develop innovative ideas and 'Pitch' solutions to solve real-world challenges.

Partners from Network of Networks: Northern Regional College (NI Colleges, coordinator), Nazaret Fundazioa (HETEL), Deltion College (TDA), Stichting Wellant (TDA), Gradia College (FINN-NET). Other partners involved: Ekonomska sola Novo Mesto (SI) and Ballymena Business Centre Limited (UK).

Digital Skills for the AI Revolution (DS4AIR)

The DS4AIR project supports innovation through the design, development and evaluation of an online training course on Digital Skills in view of the AI Revolution. The results will yield a high-quality digital learning environment, based on the needs and requirements of vulnerable adults in today's workforce.

Partners involved: South Eastern Regional College (NI Colleges), B&P Emerging Technologies Consultancy Lab Ltd (B&P EmTeC Lab), Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, Cámara de Comercio de Valencia, and SmartLearning (within the Copenhagen Business Academy).

Lean for work and lean for life

This cross-sector development project is aimed at developing the skills of teachers and trainers in vocational education and training. In this project, a train-the-trainers programme for teachers and trainers on how to teach Lean Skills in vocational education was developed and implemented. The aim is to impart Lean knowledge and skills to colleagues and students in an innovative way and to train teachers to become trainers. The training approach is interactive, experimental and inclusive.

Partners from Network of Networks: Onderwijsgroep Tilburg (TDA, coordinator), Lea Artibai (HETEL). Other partners are Vamia, Finland and Edifício ATEC, Portugal.

BRIDGES

This Erasmus+ KA2 project provides a bespoke employer engagement framework, a blended Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme and digital resources to support VET providers and professionals in improving work-based learning.

Partners involved; Belfast Met (NI Colleges), City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB), Evolve Global Solutions, Mindshift Talent Advisory, International Bund (IB), INFODEF, Center for Social Innovation and CWEP.

More examples are available on <https://partnersin.vet/other-projects-in-non/>



Ad 3: Improve Your Branding and Increase Your Name Recognition

Getting direct and credible contacts with other organisations is the first step towards increased branding and greater name recognition. Here are a few advantages.

Often, VET providers need to compete to recruit new students and potential customers for their lifelong learning training offer. That makes name recognition among students and clients for lifelong learning a must. Besides communication campaigns and outreach campaigns, raising awareness can be done through networking; collaboration with the private sector and other stakeholders (regional authorities, NGOs, etc.)

Enhanced branding and greater name recognition are also essential to HR. When organizations must compete for qualified staff, brand reputation and image can make all the difference. Do prospective employees know that they will have room for development on a personal and professional level? That they will be encouraged to seek cooperation outside their own college? Literally and figuratively broaden their horizons? Potential employees should be able to recognize and identify the organisation characteristics, and get a sense of: 'I want to belong to that'.

A proven track record will also increase the likelihood of successful funding requests in the future. Not only because of reputation, but also because it is clearer what a network member stands for, which likely results in better matchmaking where each partner is empowered and brings the right expertise and attitude to the table.

Tip: Benefits of public-private partnerships

In some regions, there are active public-private partnerships between educational institutions, companies and other stakeholders. By joining such PPP, you also get to know other companies that may be of interest to you.

One advantage of such network is the opportunities these new connections offer to enter into partnerships, start projects together, or innovate further.

It also works the other way around: enhanced branding and greater name recognition will increase more and better network contacts. This supports and facilitates disseminating project outcomes, and thus strengthen you as network partner. More about sharing expertise as essential element of networking in the next chapter (Relationship Quality Metrics) and chapter 7 (H: Reach out).



Ad 4: Align with EU Policy Priorities, and Effectively Use Funding

'Follow the money' usually refers to money being the prime motivation in a given context. When it comes to the fourth driver for networking, we'd like to recommend *not* to follow the money. Follow the underlying goals and objectives instead: Why is the funding being made available?

The better you understand the why and how of policy priorities, the easier it is to align with those ambitions. To achieve their policy goals, the EU has several instruments. One important incentive is funding, most of the times co-funding. When it comes to impact, Erasmus+ is one of the EU's most successful programmes, but there are also many other opportunities for financial support.

You should strive to align your ambitions as a network partner with the other network partners, and with policy priorities at the local/regional, national and European (international) levels. This way, co-funding becomes a great support for the goals you wanted to work on anyway. Generally, there is a great deal of (financial) accountability involved. Do not underestimate these obligations. They are easier to accept and comply with when you have aligned with policy priorities and how to work on achieving those goals.

Value Case

We present our findings and recommendations in the form of value cases. Unlike the more familiar business case, we do not take the financial costs and benefits of the networks as the primary starting point, but the value creation for various stakeholders - as well as the tensions between them. Of course, funding is essential to sustain in the long-term and therefore the financial aspects are taken into consideration. But in our opinion it's not the main component of networking.

Reserve Resources for Participation in Networks

Networking costs time and money, but so does hiring external expertise. Whatever type of cooperation you choose, it will cost time and resources, and therefore money. Whether you or your colleagues are part of a working group, a steering committee, or just occasionally provide information, these activities always come at the expense of core activities and productivity. However, you have to look at this from the perspective of outsourcing and/or hiring expertise from external staff.

We'd like to recommend making an inventory of these costs as well as the efforts that you as network partner are willing to make, and then see what type of collaboration is desirable and possible. Don't forget that access to innovations, expertise and good practices is much easier if you can make use of a smart and vibrant network.

Tip: Business Model Canvas

Although a network does not necessarily have to be profitable, finding a cost-effective business model is essential. The Business Model Canvas offers a good starting point.



5. Step 2: Mapping Your Network Using Network Metrics

Metrics to measure and compare different kinds of networks, are based on 2 pillars:

1. Network structure metrics
2. Relationship quality metrics

Both pillar 1 (structure) and pillar 2 (relationships) can be used on 3 different levels:

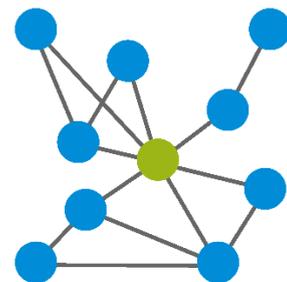
1. local/regional networks. They are often focused on a leverage point
2. cross sector networks or networks with different focus. They provoke each other by pointing out their different perspectives
3. (international) focused networks of networks

Pillar 1 - Network structure

The 4 concepts described below are some ways to understand network structure, and why they matter:

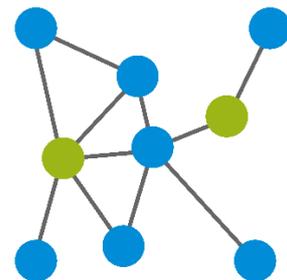
Metric 1: Centrality

Centrality measures the extent to which a node is connected to its surrounding nodes and is "central" to the network, like the green node on the right. This helps us know who the 'key players' in the network are, allowing us to build strategies on how to leverage or shift, their positions to achieve key outcomes.



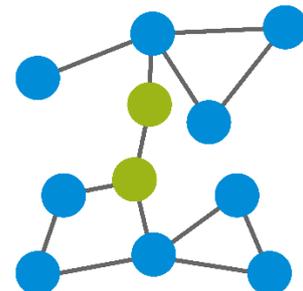
Metric 2: Connectivity

Connectivity measures how a node is connected to the nodes around it: directly or indirectly. Direct connections have lines between the two nodes. Indirect connections are connected between an intermediary node (like the green nodes).



Metric 3: Bridging

Bridging occurs where two nodes "bridge" or connect other nodes that otherwise would not be indirectly connected. Bridgers, like the green nodes to the right, play a key role in connecting various sub-groups together. They act as scale-crossing brokers.



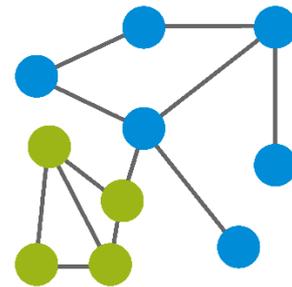
Illustrative example:

Colleges Partnership was a member of EURASHE. This meant that they were able to meet directly with officials at DGEAC and DG Employment and Social Affairs.



Metric 4: Clans

Clans are small, tightly interconnected sub-networks within the larger network organization (Like the green nodes to the right). Look for bridging nodes, which often connect these smaller groups to the larger network.

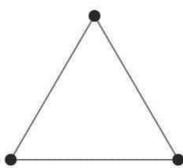


Building smarter, stronger networks

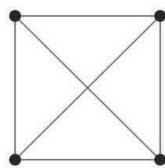
When we start building a network, initially we think: the more partners, the better. However, as we add more ties to our network, it becomes more costly and time-consuming to maintain. A lot of networks believe more collaboration is better. That often becomes our strategy. Network members are expected to show up and participate. More partners, more connections, more meetings... Most networks get stuck in this stage. The network metrics as described above can be used to build smarter, stronger (and bigger) networks without adding to the complexity.

Each network has strong ties (like we have with our family and close friends), and weaker ties (like we have with acquaintances). Maintaining weak ties with e.g. clients and competitors allows us to access their knowledge, expertise and networks without more complexity. Smart networks create as few ties as possible to achieve the same collaborative advantage. Partners have clearly defined roles, and are organized in clans (subgroups).

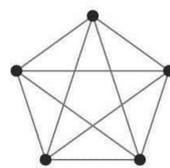
Networks tend to get complex quite quickly. Compare the following visuals and notice how the number of relationships strongly increases with each extra network partner:



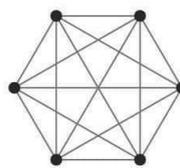
3 people, 3 lines



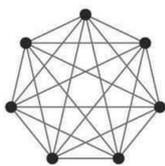
4 people, 6 lines



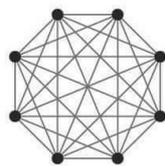
5 people, 10 lines



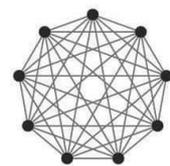
6 people, 15 lines



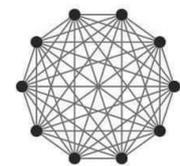
7 people, 21 lines



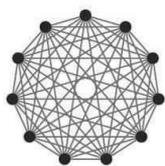
8 people, 28 lines



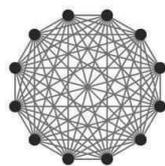
9 people, 36 lines



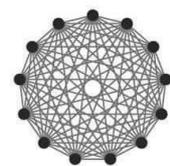
10 people, 45 lines



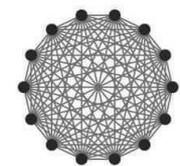
11 people, 55 lines



12 people, 66 lines



13 people, 78 lines



14 people, 91 lines

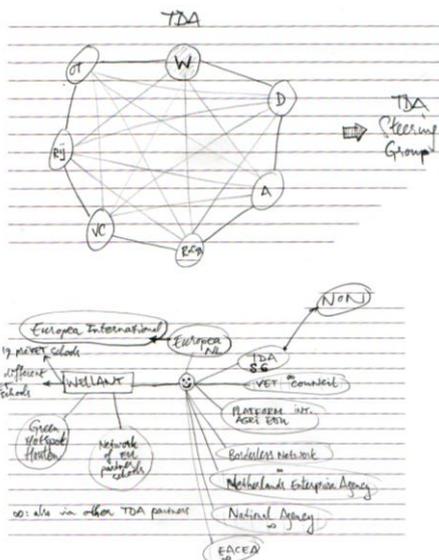


Illustrative example: network mapping

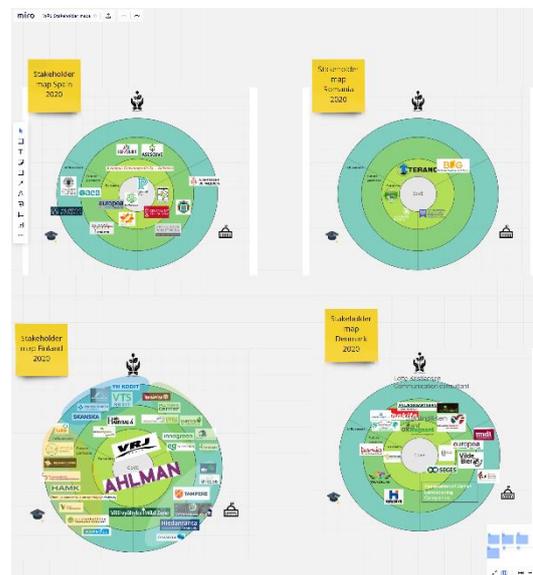
Visualising your network structure is a great exercise to gain a better understanding of how the various partners are connected, and what role they have in the network.

You can do the exercise on personal level, on organisation level and on network level (How is the network connected to other networks?). It also makes clear any weak spots in the network, and what is missing in relation to the network's future ambitions.

One way to do this is by simply grabbing a pen and paper, and start scribbling. A good alternative that we warmly recommend is the online collaborative whiteboarding platform [Miro.com](https://miro.com)



A pen and paper version



Using a virtual whiteboard on miro.com



Pillar 2 - Relationship Quality Metrics

In addition to structure, we may help point out the best strategic direction by focusing on measures of quality. Because you can learn a thing or two from network structure alone, but the most valuable insight may come from adding quality metrics for the relationships. A number of dimensions and measures could be as follows:

Dimension

Measures

1. Network membership	Organizational identification by name, type and other organizational characteristics (e.g. size, mission of organization, legal entity or informal network)
2. Network structure and interaction	Network patterns and positions identified by subgroups, key players, frequency of interaction/communication, etc.
3. Role	Convener/facilitator vs equal member. Additionally: What is the role of international department, VET leaders and managers, HRD, etc? Also: consultancy support and critical friendship.
4. Frequency of interaction	Types and levels of communications among members. Is continuous feedback and monitoring happening? Is it an option?
5. Strategic value	Power and influence, level of involvement and contribution of resources
6. Trust	Reliability, shared belief in mission / mission alignment, congruence of objectives; openness to communication / opportunity for frank discussion; Sense of belonging
7. Reciprocity	Evidence of mutual exchange of resources. After all, networking is about advancing professional goals from those vital network links, and giving back in return. To put it in other words: mutual support.

Ad 1: Network Membership

Start with inventory of current memberships. Analyse characteristics such as mission statements, foundation charters or network manifests to see to what extent intended aims match. How homogeneous or diverse can the networks be? Why? NB: the amount of diversity may influence perceptions of success, see next paragraph.

Ad 2: Network structure and interaction

Can you give an example of your own position in each of the structure metrics 1 - 4 (pillar 1)? What are the positive qualities of this structure/position? What are the limitations?

Ad 3: Roles

Possible roles in a network include:

- Connector catalyst = Connects people or close triangles (common interest)
- Network facilitator = Help convene people to set up a focused network
- Network guardian = Communication, support, training, helping with resources



- Self-organized project coordinator = Helps with self-organized projects. Needs to be persuasive and be comfortable as a peer rather than a manager or director.

Ad 4: Frequency of Interaction

How do the members within a network / between networks communicate? How often? Using what media? How does the information stream flow? Can you describe the decision-making process?

All participants should have easy access to information resources to assist them in the networking tasks. Channels of communication need be established in order to maintain collaboration and conversation among participating members, as well as communication norms (see also under 'Trust'). The norms can be supported by protocol / guidelines, but are of course reinforced in daily practice.

Ad 5: Strategic Value of a Network Partner

When you want to assess the strategic value of a network partner, you can use the following measurements:

1. **Power and Influence:**

Collaborative members bring value to the (international) network largely through their power and influence in their local/regional/national community. Such members hold prominent positions in the community, have influence as a change agent, and/or exhibit leadership.

2. **Level of Involvement:**

Actively involved members not only participate in scheduled meetings but actually accomplish tasks. The value of active involvement could also be described as knowing the job that needs to get done, and the best strategy for achieving it.

3. **Resources:**

Valued partners bring resources to the network, such as money, staff time, data, and educational materials. Some of the more intangible resources valued include knowledge, information, and feedback.

Network Tip

'Be diligent with your network. Stay connected with people and deliberately maintain relationships: offer support and keep your contact persons up to date. Keep track of those who you know, and those who know you. Not everyone will remain in the same position, at the same organization, or even in the same field of work for that matter.'

- Charles D.A. Ruffolo, the NetworKing

Ad 6: Trust

Building trust between partners has been considered as one of the biggest challenges of networks; eventually maintaining the same level of trust seems more challenging. Trust is often defined as an ongoing process, that involves personal relations and consumes a lot of time. In the evolution of a network, trust may be eroded, especially in the case of new



members joining, or of the old ones not being active enough, or simply taking advantage of the services that a network offers without contributing to any of the defined duties. Hence reciprocity, giving back, is essential (see also next paragraph).

Reliability is also a key element in measuring trust. Stay on top of what you say you will and can do – then do it. Be true to your word.

Shared values, principles, and standards that set out ground rules for decision making and conduct contribute to a sense of belonging. It's important to help members to see themselves as part of a group in which they share similar interests and values. Emphasise the common ground; the shared mission and vision, the shared challenges that we collectively address as network, the congruence of objectives.

Last but not least: openness to communication provides an opportunity for frank discussion. Norms for communication usually evolve with the development of a network, and communication of the norms, such as the issue of honesty, helps to provide a safe discussion space for the network partners.

All of these elements can be used to measure the dimension of trust, and make adjustments where necessary, in order to improve the quality of relationships in the network.

Ad 7: Reciprocity

How do you proof a balanced mutual exchange of resources? Is it necessary to collect evidence? If so, how? When you create value for others, people usually intend to return the favour, which will in turn increase the size and value of the network.

Networking is about gathering and exchanging information and expertise,. Assistance, ideas, resources and advice. It's about benefiting from those vital links, and giving back in return. In short: networking is a process of mutual support.

Network members need to feel that their involvement is worthwhile. Rewards for networking may be best related to supporting professional development, the encouraging of innovations and joint solutions to shared problems. See also chapter 4 with the main motivations and incentives for networking.



6. Step 3: Define shared core values/characteristics

Your network will explore you. Ensure they discover an unnegotiable code of ethics in your organization and on personal level. The same holds true for each network in the Network of Networks as a whole.

This code of ethics is a body of values, principles, and standards that sets out ground rules for decision making and conduct. Understanding and agreement to abide by the code of ethics is a condition of belonging. As such, a shared code of ethics can contribute to a sense of belonging. Probably needless to say, but this is by no way to advocate exclusive, shunning clubs that lock out others. A network benefits from inclusive and diverse relationships.

Networks tend to be effective when they create and maintain reinforcement of values. As Shakespeare wrote, 'To thine own self be true'. Authenticity plays on any stage.

Illustrative example: Defining the common values within our Network

After thinking on those goals that motivate the “members” to start an international collaboration network, the core values that should ground the rules for decision making in this network should also be decided. These values must be adopted by all organizations involved in the network, and were possible, aligned with the core values of each member organisation.

The Networks of Networks have successfully agreed on values important to this network; Trust, Commitment, Collaboration, Motivation and Innovation. To arrive at these values a number of steps were carried out. Firstly, we consulted historic documents that the network had produced to detect any previous values that had been informally discussed. This provided a flavour of what was important to members. Following this, a survey was sent to VET leaders of all organizations for feedback on the values we proposed to take forward. Finally, the values were presented by team members at a webinar to get further feedback and agreement from the networks steering committee and those responsible for international relations within the network. All this feedback was needed to ensure that all network members could commit to these values as their own.

Dilemma: When Is It Necessary to Fly?

An issue that the educational institutions in the Network of Networks are facing is the tension between their international mobility ambitions, often with budget airlines, and the need to travel sustainably.

Now that we have learned from the Covid-19 lockdown that online collaboration and online conferences can work perfectly fine, chances are that travel policies will change. We'll probably only board on a plane when necessary. But how to agree on necessary?



Recommendations for successful cross-border cooperation

The willingness to collaborate may be mutually apparent. Nevertheless, collaboration can sometimes be difficult in practice. Here are three key recommendations for international networking and successful cross-border cooperation, based on our gained experience.

Recommendation 1: Appreciate and respect cultural differences

The cultural dimension is one of the most important determinants of the way that networks are being established, developed and operated in Europe. Due to cultural differences, there is no universal scenario on how to create a successful network.

Keep in mind that every network is different and VET institutions within the same network differ greatly from each other. Public holidays, examinations, the workload during the academic year, curriculum contents and order, the role of companies in apprenticeships – they all may vary. Respect the frameworks of the different education systems, and the differences in culture.

Recommendation 2: Express expectations clearly

Simple as it may seem, the success of the collaboration depends on good agreements. Think about the staffing commitment on both sides, about communication and continuity in collaboration. Therefore networks should make smart agreements about collaboration and commitment

Recommendation 3: Invest in personal contacts

Most of the times, collaboration comes about through personal contacts (e.g., when visiting a fellow VET institution, or at a network event). And the longer the contacts exist, the better and more streamlined the collaboration becomes. You have a better idea of what to expect from your network partner.

However, people change positions, workplaces or even jobs. Therefore you should actively stay connected with people and deliberately maintain relationships: offer support and keep your contact persons up to date.



7. Step 4: Explore the Potential for Further Cooperation

Step 4 in the roadmap is to explore the potential for further cooperation. Compare your current network with the desired network features.

Want to have more impact? Then commit for a longer time. Do not be distracted or held back by external developments.

Sustained strategic cooperation

We aspire to bring long-term coherence and direction to the management of the Network of Networks alliance, maintaining close cooperation *irrespective of Brexit, Covid-19 and other changes in the external environment.*

The type of cooperation in a network that fits best, strongly depends on the available commitment of people and resources. The decision tree in the next paragraph helps to select the most appropriate type of network cooperation, taking into account the various motivations for networking.

Good practice: Start with baseline audit

It's recommended to start with a baseline assessment. Potential questions for the baseline assessment of a network include:

- How does the organizational reporting run (structure)?
- How does the information flow by mails?
- Who introduced you to X?
- Are the right connections in place? Are any key connections missing?
- Who are playing leadership roles in the national network? Who is not, but should be?
- Who are the experts in a certain area?
- Who are the mentors that others seek out for advice?
- Who are the innovators? Are ideas shared and acted upon?

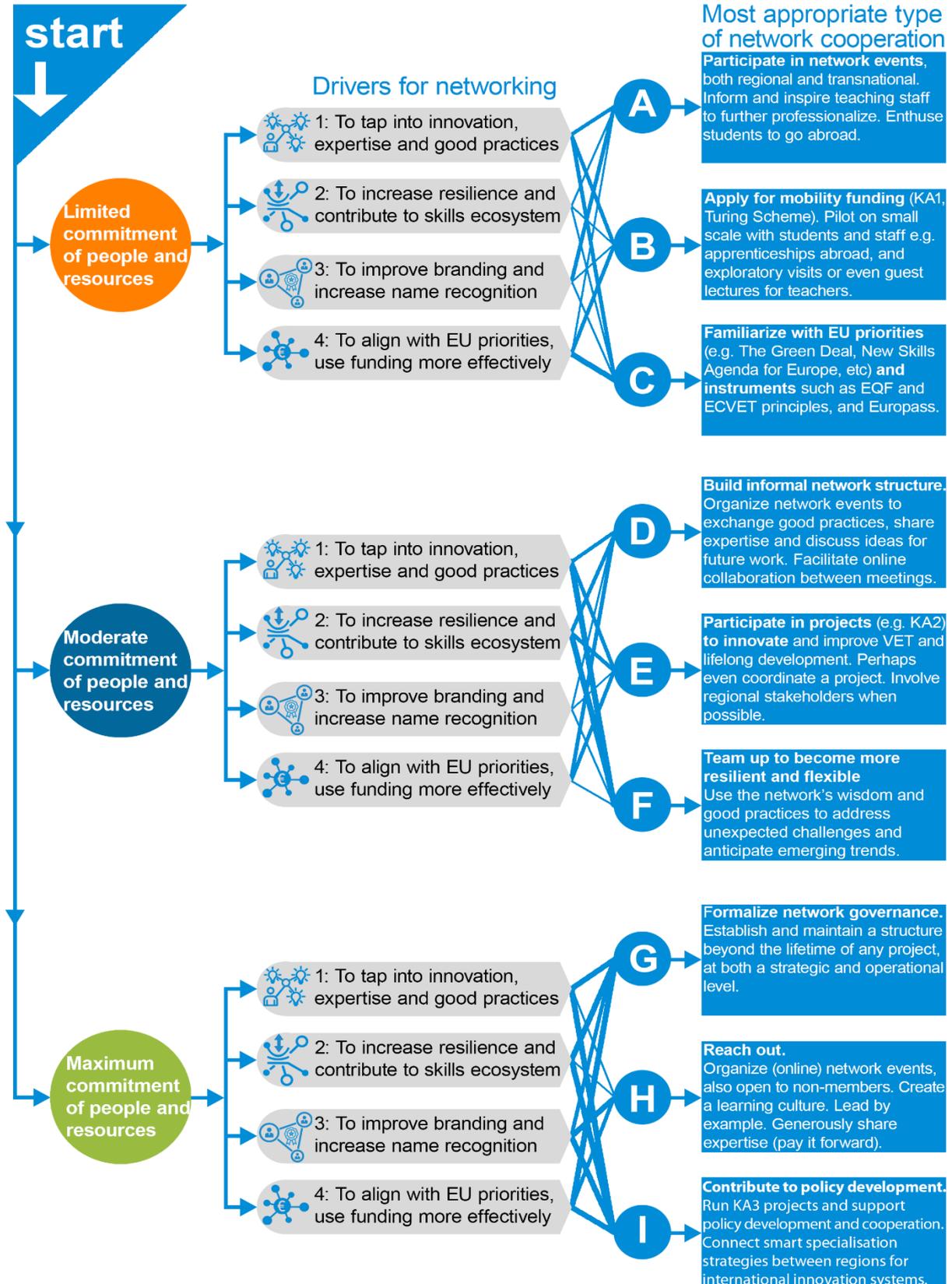
These types of questions are an addition to the network metrics in chapter 5.

See also <https://partnersin.vet/the-ka3-project-results/> for an example of a baseline audit of an informal VET network, courtesy of Work Package 6 (Reaching Out).



8. Step 5: Decision Tree

Use the decision tree to pick the type of cooperation that suits you best:





A: Participate in network events

Accept invitations for (bi)annual seminars and other (online) network events organized by others–, both in your region and transnational meetings. Inform and inspire teaching staff to further professionalize. Enthuse students to go abroad, e.g. through internationalisation at home as preparation for mobility, and campaigns to raise awareness.

Level of complexity to implement:



Incentives:

- Access to innovation, expertise and good practices ★★
- Increased resilience and contribution to the skills ecosystem ★
- Improved branding and name recognition ★★
- Aligned with EU policy priorities, more effectively use of funding ★

B: Apply for mobility funding

Request support from Erasmus+ Key Action 1 (KA1) or Turing Scheme (for UK). Start piloting mobility on small scale with students and staff. E.g. apprenticeships abroad for students, and exploratory visits or training opportunities for teachers.

Public holidays, examinations, the workload during the academic year, curriculum contents and order, the role of companies in apprenticeships – they all may vary. Respect the frameworks of the different education systems, and the differences in culture.

Level of complexity to implement:



Incentives:

- Access to innovation, expertise and good practices ★★
- Increased resilience and contribution to the skills ecosystem ★
- Improved branding and name recognition ★
- Aligned with EU policy priorities, more effectively use of funding ★★

C: Familiarize with EU priorities and instruments

Get familiar with EU policy priorities such as the six priorities of the European Commission (including the 'European Green Deal', 'A Europe fit for the digital age', and 'An economy that works for people').

Learn to work with EU instruments such as EQF (to compare the levels between VET systems), ECVET principles (e.g. learning outcomes help to clarify mutual expectations), EQUAVET (for quality assurance), and Europass. These instruments support a common language and help getting on the same page.



Level of complexity to implement:



Incentives:

- Access to innovation, expertise and good practices ★
- Increased resilience and contribution to the skills ecosystem ★★
- Improved branding and name recognition ★
- Aligned with EU policy priorities, more effectively use of funding ★★★

D: Implement an informal network structure

Organize network events to exchange good practices, share expertise and discuss ideas for future work (e.g. new projects). Facilitate online collaboration between meetings, e.g. via MS Teams, Basecamp or any other digital platform. Get VET leaders involved for structural support. Over time, you could cautiously work toward a founding charter describing the purpose of the collaboration and the shared values and vision between the network partners.

Illustrative example: Scaling up internationally from bottom-up

“The virtual cooperation we started in HETEL in 2016 between 4 Basque VET schools and a Dutch school was born *from the initiative of teachers*, who wished to offer some of the students extra activities with an international dimension. HETEL was the mediator to put in contact the Basque and the Dutch schools. From this point, the group of teachers decided on the topics, the duration of the cooperation, the working methodology for the students and the assessment of final results.

We can say that HETEL facilitated the cooperation, but the *teachers* gave it form, following a bottom-up approach to innovate in their curriculum and to implement the internationalization strategy of each college.

The management of the colleges or other VET leaders were not involved, except for giving the permission to the project.”

- Tamara Rodrigues, Coordinator of International Projects
HETEL

Level of complexity to implement:



Incentives:

- Access to innovation, expertise and good practices ★★
- Increased resilience and contribution to the skills ecosystem ★★
- Improved branding and name recognition ★
- Aligned with EU policy priorities, more effectively use of funding ★★



E: Participate in innovation projects

Use funding opportunities under Key Action 2 (KA2) or similar initiatives and run projects to innovate and improve VET, and lifelong development. Perhaps even coordinate a project. Involve regional stakeholders (e.g. representatives from the world of work) when possible.

Level of complexity to implement:



Incentives:

Access to innovation, expertise and good practices ★★

Increased resilience and contribution to the skills ecosystem ★★

Improved branding and name recognition ★

Aligned with EU policy priorities, more effectively use of funding ★★

F: Team up to become more resilient and flexible

Benefit from the network to address unexpected challenges, and anticipate emerging trends. Actively use the alliance’s wisdom and good practices to respond to changes and (policy) developments. Please note this type of collaboration is still based on an informal network structure, but goes beyond the occasional network events and projects. This is about becoming more flexible and resilient by actively learning from each other. A way of working that facilitates quick responses to questions, needs and wishes, e.g. in response to Covid-19 or Brexit, and social challenges such as crisis management, immigration, unemployment of vulnerable groups, climate change



Illustrative example: 'Reshaping Education: VET's Response to Covid19'

'Necessity is the mother of invention', so Covid-19 has been a strong drive for innovation. In February 2021 Network of Networks organised a webinar on 'VET's Response to Covid19', sharing good practices on how the main challenges were addressed.

From the network of Northern Ireland Colleges are the following 5 ways they supported staff to shift to distant learning:

1. In-house R&D team for novel teaching, learning and assessment.
2. IT Helpdesk goes beyond the traditional support and now also provides pedagogical support for teachers. Video tutorials at the start, followed by specific training on tools and methodology.
3. Gift of time: colleges started the academic year later and gave their staff more time to prepare and provide an engaging curriculum. Smaller chunks of time so teachers get time to reflect and adjust.
4. Specific training on online tools and methodology for students in the first weeks of the new academic year, to be prepared for a new lockdown.
5. Post-lockdown risk assessment and Covid-19 protocols.

Northern Ireland Colleges benefited from added value of Network of Networks as follows:

- Acceleration of staff development, innovation and peer-learning amongst teachers on larger scale with high rates of participation to quickly update their skills.
- Accelerated transition to eLearning, to novel ways of teaching, learning and assessing using digital and remote pedagogical methods
- Shared tools and methodologies to keep students engaged.
- Harvested and curated case studies and practices, e.g. How to run a college on a remote basis and still maintain the community.
- Other shared instruments and insights, e.g.

How to set up virtual mobility

3D/365 video tours, AR and VR used for education and student recruitment.

Post-lockdown risk assessment

Covid-19 protocols

- Internationalization without traveling: Virtual exchange, webinars, and online project meetings; Keeping the international perspective alive and maintaining connections.





Level of complexity to implement:

Incentives:

Access to innovation, expertise and good practices ★★★★★
Increased resilience and contribution to the skills ecosystem ★★★★★
Improved branding and name recognition ★
Aligned with EU policy priorities, more effectively use of funding ★

G: Formalize network governance

Establish and maintain a formalized network governance structure, beyond the lifetime of any project, at both at strategic and operational level. Let the networks sign a Memorandum of Understanding to communicate the mutually accepted expectations. Embed a joint long-term strategy and derived action plan for the short term. Establish and implement a network steering committee and thematic working groups.

Illustrative example: Network of Networks' Structure

To collaborate beyond the lifetime of any project, at both strategic and operational level, Network of Networks have set up a formalized governance structure. That includes a network steering committee and thematic working groups.

The steering committee, with at least 1 representative from each regional network, acts as supervisory board. They review and monitor the compliance of the strategy and the action plan. In case a conflict between network partners happens, the steering committee will mediate and use the common 5-step process of conflict resolution.

To be more directly productive, larger groups tend to break into smaller networks or clans, and virtual teams often have a small active core of 5-7 people at the centre, even if there are extended memberships. Think e.g. of an editorial workgroup that coordinates communication and dissemination for the network.

The Network of Networks has established a minimum of 3 thematic working groups, with a minimum of 1 representative from each regional network. Each academic year, one person will act as working group leader, and report to the steering committee and will be in charge of scheduling meetings and keep the contact in the group. This role will rotate each year.

The topics of the working groups could change each time, but are always according to the objectives of the strategy. To decide the topics of the working groups, the steering committee will analyse the strategy and propose those topics.

Effective networks contain skilful people who collaborate and work well together. The skills required by network members are similar to the skills associated with effective teams and



include a focus on dispersed leadership and empowerment. Therefore networks enjoy a degree of self-management.

This does not imply that there is any lack of leadership, or that the processes are not managed, especially given that these aspects are even more critical than in traditional organisations. They are different from those practised in traditional hierarchical organisations and they demand specific skills. Networks often function with different leaders for different aspects, and leadership is a dynamic and distributed phenomenon.

Although setting up a steering committee and working groups doesn't seem too complex, it's hard to persuade all the VET Leaders of the member colleges in each regional network to invest structurally in the Network of Networks with people and resources. Years of cooperation and prudent growth in trust precede the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding to formalize the Network of Networks.

Level of complexity to implement:



Incentives:

- Access to innovation, expertise and good practices ★★★★★
- Increased resilience and contribution to the skills ecosystem ★★★★★
- Improved branding and name recognition ★★
- Aligned with EU policy priorities, more effectively use of funding ★★★★★

H: Reach out.

Organize (online) network events that are also open to non-members. Create a learning culture in your network, for example by providing structural training opportunities for staff. Lead by example. Generously share expertise (pay it forward) and inspire others.

Is the network open to expansion with new members? If so, agree on the membership conditions. Do potential network partners need to meet a set of criteria? Be clear in communicating these conditions and criteria. Before you enter into a very intensive, formal collaboration for the long term, it is advisable to agree on a trial period for prospective members, to get mutually acquainted. Keep talking to each other, even if the collaboration does not go according to plan, and adjust where necessary.



Illustrative example:

Some good examples of networks and network organisations that actively reach out on a structural basis include:

EfVET, European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and training, has been successful in establishing itself as a key stakeholder in education and training in Brussels and is regularly asked to contribute and consult. EfVET is engaged in the EU policies on formal and non-formal VET and cooperates with European Union Institutions and many international and national NGO's.

EfVET has established good contact with European Commission especially with DG-EMPL, the unit for VET, Apprenticeships and Adult Learning.

<https://www.ef.europa.eu/>

Europea International is an association for the development of VET in the green sector of Europe that also works as a network of networks. At present, Europea International organizes 25 national Europea networks, which represent more than 1.000 vocational schools and institutions all over Europe.

Europea International offers a network of European colleagues committed to international cooperation and sharing of knowledge; an effective framework for international cooperation in projects funded by the EU and other agencies, and advocacy vis-à-vis the EU institutions.

<https://europea.org/>

ETF, the European Training Foundation, is a European Union agency that helps transition and developing countries harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training and labour market systems, and in the context of the EU's external relations policy.

They engage and cooperate with a wide range of stakeholders from Institutions, donor, social partners and civic society organizations in ETF partner countries, the European Union and at the international level.

<https://www.etf.europa.eu>

Katapult is a learning network that contributes to robust, flourishing VET institutions by cultivating mutually beneficial relationships with the commercial sectors by forming public-private partnerships. They support these public-private partnerships with tools and guidance so the partners can build robust organizations that will benefit students, educational institutions, industry and society.

At Katapult, they actively share their knowledge and experience regarding public private partnerships in education, offer expertise on how to implement their various free tools, and building blocks for public private partnerships.

<https://wearekatapult.eu/>



Level of complexity to implement:



Incentives:

- Access to innovation, expertise and good practices ★
- Increased resilience and contribution to the skills ecosystem ★
- Improved branding and name recognition ★★
- Aligned with EU policy priorities, more effectively use of funding ★★

I: Contribute to policy development

Apply for and/or participate in Key Action 3 (KA3) projects and contribute to policy development and cooperation. Connect smart specialisation strategies in your region to those in other regions for international innovation systems, e.g. via a transnational network of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE).

What are Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)?

Vocational Excellence ensures high quality skills and competences that lead to quality employment and career-long opportunities, which meet the needs of an innovative, inclusive and sustainable economy.

The initiative on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) defines a bottom-up approach to excellence where Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions are capable of rapidly adapting skills provision to societal and economic needs, supporting the green and digital transitions.

CoVEs bring together a wide range of partners from different countries. Together they co-create so-called 'skills ecosystems' that contribute to regional development, innovation, industrial clusters, and smart specialisation strategies, as well as social inclusion.

Some partners in Network of Networks are involved in KA3 projects on CoVEs, e.g. TDA member Wellantcollege coordinates the European Platform for Urban Greening (620456-EPP-1-2020-1-NL-EPPKA3-VET-COVE).

Level of complexity to implement:



Incentives:

- Access to innovation, expertise and good practices ★★
- Increased resilience and contribution to the skills ecosystem ★★
- Improved branding and name recognition ★★
- Aligned with EU policy priorities, more effectively use of funding ★★



9. Step 6: Using the Continuous Improvement Cycle

Internal feedback loops are essential when building or further developing a transnational network. These loops, or miniature PDCA cycles are part of the continuous improvement cycle. They take time but are needed to monitor progress and make changes where necessary.

Illustrative example: process steps towards a joint strategy and action plan

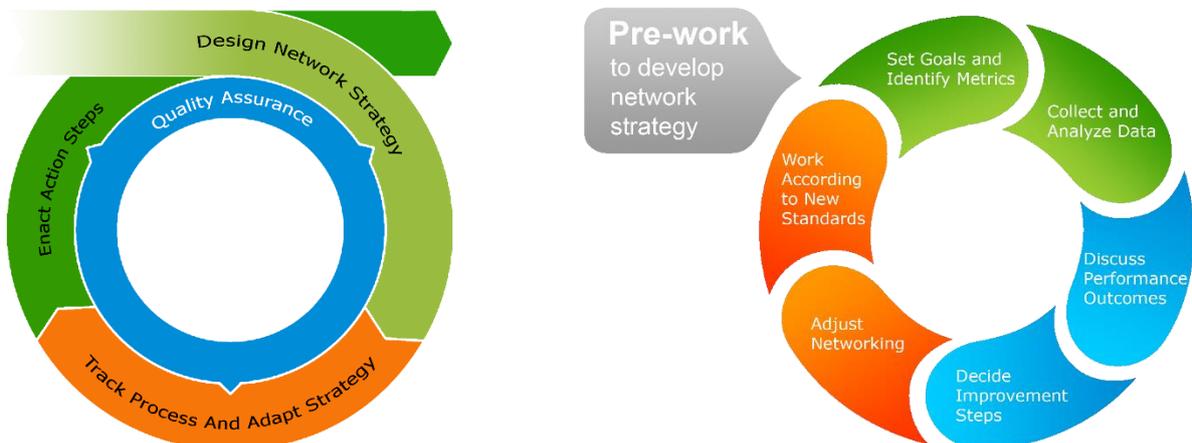
In order to further develop our Network of Networks and move towards the next level, we have established a joint strategy for the mid-long term, and a derived action plan for the short term.

You can download both documents on <https://partnersin.vet/the-ka3-project-results/>. The annexes will show the steps we have taken, and make clear that internal feedback loops add to the quality. How many miniature cycles do you count between start and final products?

To build a data-driven, smart strategic network, we've collected data and used the right the key factors. The metrics described in chapter 5 were used to set up a network strategy (and action plan), and to measure the green part of diagram 2 below (first steps in the process).

Next, we discussed aimed outcomes and selected improvement steps (the blue part of diagram 2). These are described in our action plan (and, more broadly, in the joint Network of Networks strategy).

How do we implement change now that we have gathered the right insights and data? Starting in academic year 2021-2022, we implement the action plan. This way, the network will make adjustments to our current way of networking, and implement new ways of working (the orange part in diagram 2). We aim to enact our action plan and improve our strategy, before moving back to the tracking stage once more for continuous quality improvement.





9. Step 7: Find Inspiration at Every Step of the Process

Establishing a strategic network can take a lot of time and efforts. Sometimes it's hard work. But building relationships with others and creating a positive process of mutual support can also be very rewarding. It will provide deep, meaningful and lasting experiences. Don't lose sight of that.

Hopefully, you've enjoyed the illustrative examples and tips in this model to establish meaningful and sustainable transnational relationships. They indicate how it *could* be done, not how it should be done.

We've aimed to provide inspiration at every step of the process toward strategic networking. Over 25 additional good practices are available on <https://partnersin.vet/the-ka3-project-results/>.

Illustrative example: How to select and use good practices

As part of capacity building, exchange of good practices and mutual learning, a compilation was made of good practices detected in the Network of Networks.

Each network rated the good practiced from this long list on 4 features:

- Innovation
- Relevance
- Most impact
- Transferable

The good practices with the highest rates were selected for the pilot tests. Results of the pilot tests are used as input for staff development programmes of the VET colleges in the Network of Networks.

Finally: celebrate your successes. No matter how big or small a success, reflect on it and take time to celebrate it. This brings renewed energy to network and a good opportunity for further collaboration.

'Remember, there are no strangers, only friends you have not met. So go out there, shake some hands, and position yourself for success. The beauty of networking is that you never know where it will lead.'

- Charles D.A. Ruffolo, the NetworkKing,
keynote speech at the online Network of Network conference for VET Leaders



10. Colophon

About this publication:

This handbook has been compiled based on desk research, interviews, meetings and brainstorm sessions with network partners, and surveys among VET Leaders. The input is backed up by scientific findings, 'future oriented research' as done by OECD, CEDEFOP and World Economic Forum, and plenty of practical experience prior to and during this project.

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