

COVE-EXSEE

COVEs Expanding in South East Europe through Synergies and Innovation

Deliverable D2.1 –Operational plan for support structures

CONSORTIUM



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Abbreviations and Terminology

Abbreviation	Meaning
CoVE	Centre of Vocational Excellence
COVE-EXSEE	COVEs Expanding in South East Europe through Synergies and Innovation
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
EC	European Commission
GA	Grant Agreement
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NDT	Non-Destructive Testing
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WP	Work Package

Executive Summary

This deliverable presents **D2.1 – Operational Plan for Support Structures**, developed within Work Package 2 of the COVE-EXSEE project. Its purpose is to establish the common conceptual, operational and governance framework through which COVE-EXSEE will strengthen vocational excellence ecosystems across the participating regions. Rather than creating new standalone institutions, the Operational Plan defines Support Structures as **enabling and connecting mechanisms** that facilitate cooperation between vocational education and training providers, industry, research organisations, public authorities and other ecosystem actors, while improving access to training, expertise, technical resources, partnerships, qualification pathways and funding opportunities.

The Operational Plan was developed through an evidence-based approach combining the COVE-EXSEE stakeholder needs assessment, funding landscape mapping and transferable practices identified from the **COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET** Centres of Vocational Excellence. The review of these previous initiatives provided practical reference points related to governance, stakeholder engagement, capacity building, digital learning resources, work-based learning, peer learning, quality assurance, funding intelligence and long-term sustainability. These practices were not replicated as fixed models; instead, relevant elements were adapted to the institutional and skills contexts represented within COVE-EXSEE.

The needs assessment demonstrates that the participating ecosystems share several common challenges while also presenting distinct regional priorities. Across the regions, recurring issues include the need to update curricula and skills provision, strengthen cooperation between education and industry, improve access to specialised infrastructure and technical resources, increase trainer capacity and create more accessible pathways to recognised learning and qualifications. At the same time, technical priorities differ by region. Romania places particular emphasis on digital skills, welding and green/circular competences; Greece on digital skills, NDT and green skills; Serbia on digital skills, NDT and welding; and Türkiye on welding, NDT and digital manufacturing skills. The Italian results, based on a more limited sample, indicate interest particularly in digital skills for manufacturing, green/circular skills, industry collaboration and applied learning approaches. These differences confirm the need for a common Support Structure framework that allows substantial regional adaptation.

On this basis, the Operational Plan defines a **modular service portfolio** that can be configured according to regional needs and capacity. The common portfolio

includes training, curriculum and learning support; trainer and staff capacity building; knowledge and resource sharing; stakeholder, partnership and mobility brokerage; career-pathway support; technical, innovation and R&D brokerage; access to specialised expertise; skills intelligence and foresight; qualification, certification, policy, funding and consortium guidance; and knowledge transfer, peer learning and dissemination. Support Structures will combine a coordinated access and brokerage role with the delivery, coordination or facilitation of selected training, R&D brokerage and advisory services, according to their regional operational plans. They are not expected to provide every specialised service internally; rather, they will identify and clarify stakeholder needs and connect users with the most appropriate organisation, expert, resource or opportunity within the regional or wider COVE-EXSEE network. Where relevant capacity exists, services may be delivered directly by the coordinating organisation or another participating partner.

The governance model follows the same principle of **common functions with regional flexibility**. Drawing on governance practices from COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET, the model is based on multi-stakeholder participation, clear coordination, separation of governance functions, distributed responsibility, proportionate governance and continuous improvement. Each Support Structure is expected to ensure strategic direction and decision-making, stakeholder participation, operational coordination, specialist service-delivery capacity and monitoring and feedback.

The common framework is translated into **five territorially anchored Support Structures and one transnational enabling mechanism**. Romania, Greece, Serbia, Türkiye and Italy each have regionally adapted operational plans defining their mission, service portfolio, operating model, governance arrangements, resources, recurring activities and potential sustainability mechanisms. In addition, European wide transnational structure will support the regional mechanisms by connecting them with European qualification expertise, Authorised Nominated Bodies and Authorised Training Bodies, professional and industry networks, European funding and cooperation opportunities, and cross-regional peer learning.

The funding landscape analysis complements the operational framework by identifying potential European, national and regional financing routes that could support different functions of the Support Structures. Relevant European instruments include **Erasmus+, ESF+, ERDF, Horizon**. The analysis shows that no single funding programme is likely to finance the entire operation of a Support Structure. Instead, funding needs to be matched to specific functions and eligible ecosystem actors. The Funding and Policy Opportunities Matrix (Annexed to the document) therefore links Support Structure functions with relevant funding routes and likely applicants or beneficiaries in each participating context.

Long-term sustainability is consequently approached through **diversification rather than dependence on a single funding source**. Depending on the regional model, potential continuation mechanisms may include public and national funding, European projects, service contracts, membership contributions, industry sponsorship, course-related revenues and in-kind contributions.

D2.1 represents the **planning and design stage** of the Support Structures rather than their final validation. The next phase of WP2 will move the proposed configurations into pilot implementation. During this phase, partners will confirm coordination points, participating organisations, staff, technical and digital resources and referral mechanisms, while the proposed services will be tested according to real stakeholder demand. Pilot implementation will generate evidence on service use, functionality, stakeholder participation and user feedback.

Overall, D2.1 provides COVE-EXSEE with a common operational foundation that connects **regional needs, existing CoVE experience, service delivery, governance and funding opportunities**. Its central principle is that vocational excellence does not require every region to build the same institution or duplicate existing resources. Instead, sustainable regional skills ecosystems can be strengthened by creating coordinated mechanisms that make existing knowledge, expertise, infrastructure, networks and opportunities easier to access, combine and adapt to regional needs.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Deliverable

The transformation of European economies, driven by digitalisation, the green transition, industrial innovation, and demographic change, is reshaping the skills required across all sectors. Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems are therefore expected not only to equip learners with technical competences but also to act as strategic partners in regional innovation, economic development, and lifelong learning. In response to these challenges, the European Commission has positioned Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) as catalysts for developing resilient skills ecosystems that integrate education, industry, research, public authorities, and civil society around shared regional priorities. This ecosystem approach recognises that vocational excellence is achieved through sustained collaboration, innovation, and responsiveness to labour market needs rather than through the performance of individual institutions alone.

Within this context, the **COVE-EXSEE (CoVEs Expanding in South East Europe through Synergies and Innovation)** project seeks to strengthen vocational excellence across South-East Europe by building upon the achievements of three established Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) initiatives—**COVE-WENDT**, **AILEEN**, and **WELDNET**. Rather than creating new organisational structures, the project focuses on consolidating proven methodologies, governance approaches, educational resources, and collaborative networks into a coherent framework that can be adapted to different regional and national contexts. Through this approach, COVE-EXSEE aims to reinforce regional cooperation, improve skills provision, stimulate innovation, and enhance the long-term sustainability of vocational excellence ecosystems.

This document constitutes **Deliverable D2.1 – Operational Plan for Support Structures**, developed under Work Package 2 (Development of Support Structures). It establishes the strategic and operational framework for designing, implementing, and sustaining the support structures that will facilitate cooperation among vocational education providers, higher education institutions, research organisations, industry, public authorities, clusters, and other ecosystem actors participating in COVE-EXSEE.

The Operational Plan goes beyond defining organisational arrangements. It provides a comprehensive framework describing how support structures should function as enabling mechanisms that coordinate stakeholders, facilitate knowledge exchange, promote innovation, strengthen institutional capacities, support policy dialogue, and improve access to funding opportunities. By integrating evidence gathered through stakeholder consultations, regional needs assessments, funding landscape mapping, and lessons learned from previous CoVE initiatives, the Operational Plan establishes a common foundation while allowing sufficient flexibility to respond to the diverse needs of the participating countries.

As the first strategic deliverable of Work Package 2 (WP2), D2.1 provides the reference framework for the subsequent implementation activities of the project, including pilot deployment, capacity-building programmes, long-term scale-up plans across all participating regions. Consequently, the Operational Plan functions not only as a project deliverable but also as the principal operational reference for establishing sustainable support structures capable of extending the impact of COVE-EXSEE beyond the project's lifetime.

2. Methodology

The evidence-gathering methodology used in the development of the Operational Plan is presented in this chapter.

2.1 Methodological Approach

The Operational Plan for the COVE-EXSEE Support Structures was developed through an evidence-based and participatory methodology designed to ensure that the proposed framework responds to the actual needs of vocational excellence ecosystems across South-East Europe. Rather than relying on a single source of information, the methodology integrates complementary evidence gathered from four interconnected activities undertaken within WP2: (i) stakeholder interest survey (ii) stakeholder consultations, (iii) analysis of best practices from previous CoVE initiatives and (iv) funding landscape mapping

Each activity generated a distinct body of evidence that informed different dimensions of the Operational Plan. The stakeholder survey and interviews identified regional needs and priorities for capacity building, technological

solutions, policy support, and cooperation. The funding landscape mapping explored opportunities to sustain and expand CoVE activities beyond the project's lifetime. The review of previous CoVE initiatives provided transferable governance models, implementation approaches, and operational practices that have already demonstrated their effectiveness in different European contexts.

The findings from these four activities were systematically synthesised to develop the COVE-EXSEE Operational Framework, which subsequently informed the governance model, support structures, and country-specific operational plans presented in this deliverable. This methodology ensured that the proposed framework is grounded in practical experience, reflects stakeholder expectations, and aligns with regional opportunities for long-term sustainability.

2.2 Stakeholder Survey and Needs Assessment

The stakeholder survey constituted the primary evidence-gathering activity supporting the development of the Operational Plan. Its objective was to identify the needs, expectations, priorities, and challenges of the organisations and individuals expected to participate in or benefit from the COVE-EXSEE support structures.

The survey was initially designed by EWF, the leader of WP2, based on the objectives defined in the project proposal and discussions with partners. To ensure methodological consistency and relevance across all participating countries, the draft questionnaire underwent a consortium-wide review process. All project partners were invited to evaluate the survey, provide recommendations for improvement, and complete a structured peer-review checklist specifically developed to formalise comments and requested revisions. The survey was subsequently piloted within the consortium before its official launch, allowing the project team to validate the clarity, relevance, and applicability of the questions.

Recognising the diversity of actors involved in vocational excellence ecosystems, the consortium adopted a differentiated survey design. Rather than developing separate questionnaires, a single online survey platform (see the forms here [Interest Survey – Fill out form](#)) was created comprising five tailored survey pathways corresponding to different stakeholder categories:

- Trainers, educators, and academic staff;

- Existing CoVE members;
- Students and learners;
- Industry professionals;
- Policy makers.

All partners shared the main link provided above with their stakeholders. Additionally, METU translated the survey into Turkish and distributed this local version (Turkish version <https://forms.gle/gcuYTX6SWvGsAgJP6>). By applying conditional logic, respondents were only shown questions relevant to their specific stakeholder profile, such as students seeing only student-related questions. This improved the quality and relevance of the collected data while maintaining a single, harmonised survey instrument.

The survey combined multiple question formats to capture both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Likert-scale questions were used to assess perceptions, priorities, and levels of agreement; multiple-choice questions explored areas of interest and existing practices; while open-ended questions enabled respondents to provide additional insights.

Following validation, the survey was disseminated across the participating countries through the networks of the project partners. National dissemination activities were coordinated by each consortium member within their respective countries, while EWF additionally promoted the survey among South East Europe and entire Europe stakeholders and relevant organisations within its wider European network.

The survey remained open for approximately three months, enabling broad stakeholder participation across different sectors and regions. Responses were analysed at both country and stakeholder levels to identify regional priorities, sector-specific needs, and opportunities for collaboration. The analysis formed the basis for the development of the Interest Matrix, presented in Chapter 5 which identifies the training materials, technological solutions, and policy support most demanded by different stakeholder groups across the participating countries.

2.3 Stakeholder Interviews

Stakeholder interviews were conducted with experts across VET, industry, policy, and higher education. ISIM developed the interview guidelines with input from the

remaining partners. The final guideline is structured into four sections, each with a distinct focus:

- **Section A:** Explores support structure requirements for trainers, professionals, and academic staff.
- **Section B:** Addresses the sustainability of these support structures.
- **Section C:** Targets funding authorities.
- **Section D:** Focuses on key questions for policy makers.

The complete interview guideline is provided in Annex 2.

2.4 Funding Landscape Mapping

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of CoVEs requires not only strong governance and stakeholder engagement but also access to diverse financial resources capable of supporting educational innovation, infrastructure development, capacity building, and regional cooperation. For this reason, a dedicated funding landscape mapping activity was conducted as one of the core methodological components underpinning the Operational Plan.

A common data collection template (see Annex I) was developed by EWF and distributed to all project partners to ensure consistency in the information gathered across participating countries. Each partner was responsible for identifying relevant funding instruments available within its national context, while EWF and IIW complemented this information at European level.

The mapping exercise considered a broad range of funding mechanisms capable of supporting vocational excellence and skills ecosystem development, including European Structural and Investment Funds, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), regional innovation schemes, national education programmes, and other relevant financial instruments supporting skills development, research, innovation, and industrial collaboration.

The mapping activity aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the funding landscape available to participating regions. The collected information was subsequently consolidated into a Funding and Policy Opportunities Matrix, identifying potential financial pathways that can support the establishment, operation, expansion, and long-term sustainability of the proposed support

structures. The results of this activity directly informed the resource planning and sustainability considerations presented in Chapters 9 of this deliverable.

2.5 Best Practice Analysis from Previous CoVEs

A central objective of COVE-EXSEE is to capitalise on the knowledge, experience, and achievements generated through previous CoVE initiatives. Consequently, a structured review of the COVE-WENDT, AILEEN, and WELDNET projects was undertaken to identify transferable practices that could strengthen the design of the COVE-EXSEE support structures.

Project partners ISIM, EWF and CERTH contributed examples of successful practices implemented within these initiatives across a common set of thematic areas agreed by the consortium. These included governance arrangements, educational and training resources, digital platforms, quality assurance practices, sustainability mechanisms, funding approaches, and cooperation models among VET, industry and public authorities.

The objective of the analysis was not to replicate existing solutions but to identify elements demonstrating proven effectiveness that could be adapted to the diverse institutional and regional contexts represented within COVE-EXSEE.

The findings of this analysis are presented in Chapter 4, where transferable lessons learned from previous CoVE initiatives are discussed in greater detail.

2.6 Integration of Evidence into the Operational Framework

The final stage of the methodology consisted of integrating the evidence generated through the four complementary activities into a coherent operational framework for the COVE-EXSEE support structures.

The stakeholder survey and interview identified the needs and expectations of regional actors, the funding landscape mapping highlighted opportunities for financial sustainability, and the analysis of previous CoVEs provided practical implementation experience. Together, these evidence streams established the foundation for developing the governance model, operational processes, resource requirements, and country-specific implementation approaches presented throughout this deliverable.

This integrated methodology ensures that the proposed support structures are not based solely on theoretical considerations but are informed by stakeholder demand, proven European practices, and realistic opportunities for long-term sustainability. Consequently, the Operational Plan represents an evidence-based framework capable of supporting the development and consolidation of CoVEs across South-East Europe while remaining sufficiently flexible to accommodate regional diversity and future evolution.

3. Policy and Strategic Context

3.1 The Evolution of Vocational Excellence in Europe

The rapidly changing economic and technological landscape is transforming the role of VET across Europe. Digitalisation, the green transition, demographic change, and increasing global competition require education systems to prepare learners not only with technical competences but also with the adaptability, innovation capacity, and transversal skills needed to respond to evolving labour market demands. Consequently, vocational excellence has emerged as a strategic priority within the European Union's skills agenda, positioning VET as a key contributor to economic competitiveness, regional innovation, and social cohesion (European Union, 2021)¹.

This evolution has led to a fundamental shift in the understanding of CoVEs. Rather than being viewed as individual institutions delivering high-quality vocational education, CoVEs are increasingly recognised as regional skills ecosystems that connect education providers, industry, and research organisations around common regional development objectives (EU Commission)². In this ecosystem approach, vocational excellence is achieved through collaboration, knowledge

¹ European Union, 2021. CENTRES OF VOCATIONALEXCELLENCE (CoVEs) – A key initiative of European Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy. https://maritime-forum.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9ccc263d-c9bb-438b-a048-617413e9c557_en?filename=20210416_cove_factsheet_2021.pdf

² https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/skills-jobs/centres-vocational-excellence_en

exchange, innovation, and long-term partnerships rather than through the activities of a single organisation see Figure 2.



Figure 1: Core Components of CoVE

Source: EU, (2021). *CENTRES OF VOCATIONALEXCELLENCE (CoVEs) – A key initiative of European Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy*

The European Training Foundation (ETF) further emphasises that vocational excellence should be understood as a dynamic process rather than a fixed institutional model. According to this perspective, successful CoVEs continuously adapt to regional economic priorities, foster stakeholder collaboration, promote innovation, and strengthen links between education and the labour market. Support structures therefore become essential mechanisms that enable these collaborative ecosystems to function effectively by facilitating coordination, knowledge sharing, capacity building, and continuous improvement (ETF, 2025).³

Within this context, COVE-EXSEE focuses on strengthening and connecting existing CoVEs across South-East Europe rather than establishing a new sector-specific CoVE. Building upon the achievements of projects such as COVE-WENDT, AILEEN, and WELDNET, COVE-EXSEE aims to ensure the continuity and expansion of vocational excellence by facilitating the transfer of good practices, sharing educational resources, strengthening staff capacities, supporting work-based learning, peer learning and mobility, improving communication between CoVEs, promoting micro credentials, providing support services for SMEs, and enhancing

³ ETF (2025). Towards vocational excellence: Building skills ecosystems for the future. https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-09/Leaflet_ENE_JMG_WEB.pdf

the long-term visibility and sustainability of vocational excellence through appropriate governance and policy support.

The project therefore positions support structures not as administrative entities but as enabling mechanisms that facilitate cooperation between stakeholders, coordinate regional activities, encourage innovation, and ensure that the knowledge and experience generated by existing CoVEs continue to create value beyond individual projects.

3.2 European Policy Drivers for Vocational Excellence

The development of the COVE-EXSEE Operational Plan is closely aligned with the European policy framework governing vocational education, skills development, lifelong learning, and regional innovation. Rather than treating these policies as independent initiatives, COVE-EXSEE integrates their complementary objectives into a coherent operational framework that supports sustainable vocational excellence ecosystems.

3.2.1 Building Regional Skills Ecosystems

The Centres of Vocational Excellence Initiative, introduced under the Erasmus+ programme, promotes a new vision of vocational education in which excellence is achieved through strong partnerships between education providers, industry, research organisations, public authorities, and other regional stakeholders. CoVEs are expected to contribute not only to high-quality education but also to regional innovation, economic development, social inclusion, and smart specialisation strategies (European Commission).⁴

This ecosystem perspective is reinforced by the European Skills Agenda, which identifies skills development as a key driver of Europe's competitiveness, resilience, and digital and green transitions. The agenda encourages closer cooperation between education and industry, increased investment in lifelong learning,

⁴ https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/skills-jobs/centres-vocational-excellence_en

improved anticipation of future skills needs, and stronger regional partnerships capable of responding to rapidly changing labour markets (European Commission)⁵.

Similarly, the Pact for Skills promotes long-term cooperation among public and private stakeholders to address skills shortages through collective action, knowledge sharing, and investment in workforce development. The initiative highlights the importance of collaborative governance models and encourages stakeholders to jointly develop innovative education and training solutions (European Commission, 2025).⁶

These policy initiatives collectively provide the strategic foundation for the COVE-EXSEE support structures. The proposed framework is therefore designed to strengthen regional cooperation, facilitate communication between CoVEs, encourage knowledge exchange, coordinate capacity-building activities, support SME engagement, promote work-based learning, peer learning and learner mobility, and improve access to educational resources and funding opportunities.

3.2.2 Promoting Excellence, Innovation and Quality in VET

European policies increasingly recognise vocational education as a strategic contributor to innovation, sustainability, and regional competitiveness. The Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience highlights the importance of learner-centred education, flexible learning pathways, digital and green competences, strong partnerships with employers, and continuous quality improvement.

Complementing this vision, the Osnabrück Declaration identifies vocational education as a key instrument for supporting Europe's digital and green transitions. It encourages Member States and VET providers to strengthen international cooperation, promote innovation in teaching and learning, improve the attractiveness of vocational education, and reinforce links between education,

⁵ https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda_en

⁶ European Commission (2025). What is the Pact for Skills? https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu/document/download/72c56aba-4f9f-4a0e-81d6-5bfd5ec6f9be_en?filename=Pact-for-Skills-Infosheet-EN%20-%20May%202025_.pdf

research, and industry (Osnabrück Declaration, 2020)⁷. These priorities directly influence the design of the COVE-EXSEE support structures. Beyond coordinating stakeholders, the proposed framework seeks to establish sustainable mechanisms for continuous professional development, peer learning, exchange of best practices, collaborative curriculum development, dissemination of innovative educational methodologies, and institutional capacity building. In doing so, the support structures contribute to strengthening the long-term quality, resilience, and innovation capacity of existing Centres of Vocational Excellence.

3.2.3 Supporting Flexible and Transparent Learning Pathways

As vocational education becomes increasingly flexible and international, European policy emphasises the importance of transparent qualifications, recognition of skills, and learner mobility (The Copenhagen Declaration, 2002)⁸.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) provides a common reference framework that facilitates the comparison of qualifications across countries, while the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) classification supports the alignment of education with labour market needs through a common skills terminology.

At the same time, the growing importance of micro credentials reflects the need for flexible, targeted, and lifelong learning opportunities that enable learners and professionals to continuously update their competences throughout their careers. Micro credentials complement traditional qualifications by recognising smaller learning achievements that respond rapidly to technological change and evolving industry demands (European Union, 2020)⁹.

These policy instruments are particularly relevant to COVE-EXSEE, which seeks to facilitate the exchange of educational resources and promote transferable learning opportunities across participating CoVEs. By encouraging the adoption of common competence frameworks, supporting micro credential-based learning opportunities, and facilitating cooperation between vocational education

⁷ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/osnabrueck_declaration_eu2020.pdf

⁸ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/copenhagen_declaration_en.pdf

⁹ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/towards-european-approach-micro-credentials-analytical-report.pdf#page=41.11>

providers, the project contributes to improving the transparency, recognition, and portability of skills across South-East Europe. Consequently, the COVE-EXSEE support structures have been designed as enabling mechanisms that translate European vocational excellence policies into practical implementation.

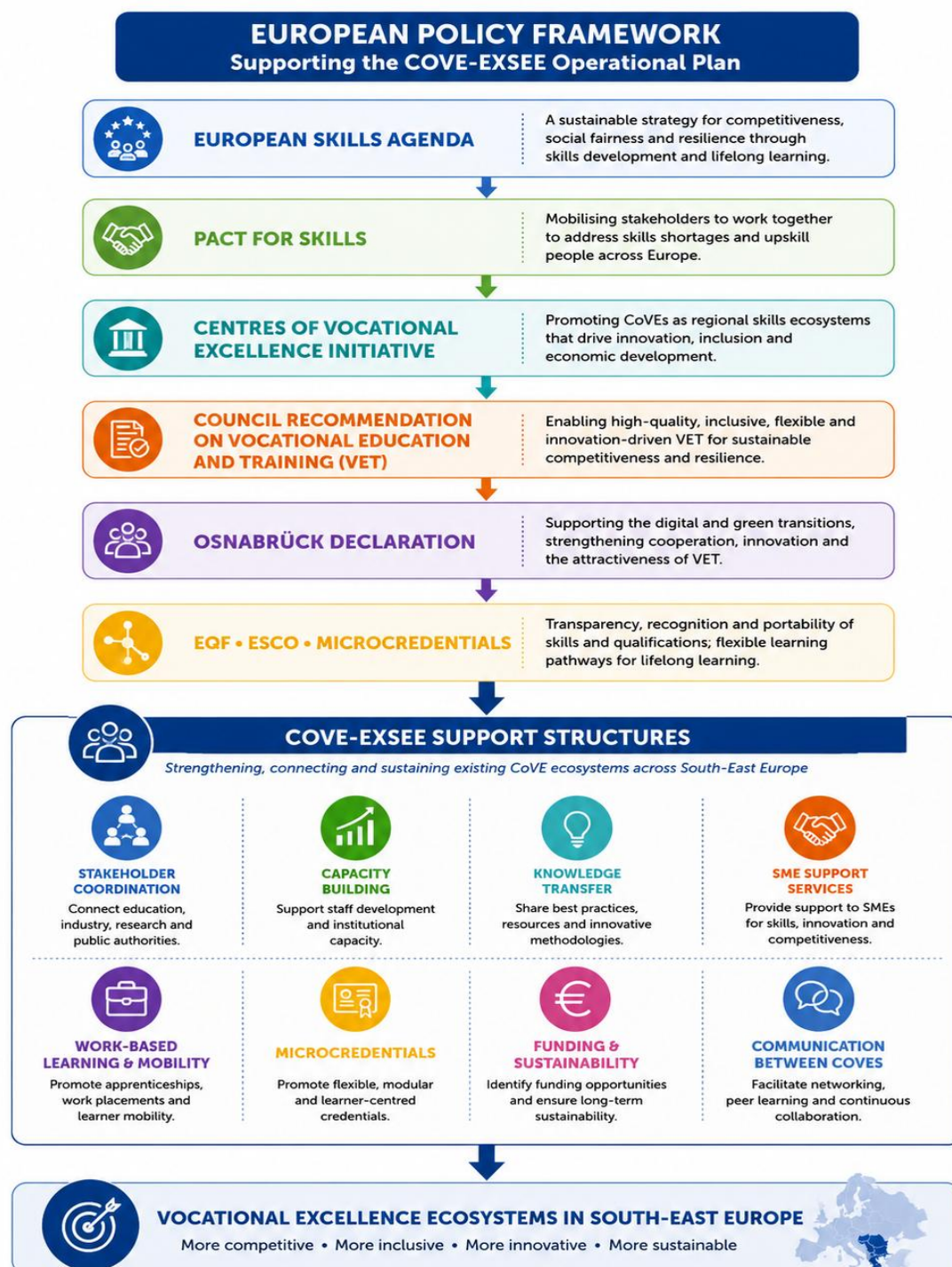


Figure 2: European Policy Framework Supporting the COVE-EXSEE Operational Plan

4. Best practices from COVE WENT – AILEEN – WELDNET

The COVe EXSEE consortium adopted a knowledge transfer approach that identifies, analyses and adapts proven practices with demonstrated potential to strengthen vocational excellence ecosystems. To support this process, a structured review of the COVE-WENDT, AILEEN, and WELDNET projects was carried out by the consortium. Partners contributed best practices using a common analytical framework, enabling the systematic assessment of their maturity, transferability and relevance to COVE-EXSEE. The review considered a broad range of operational dimensions, including governance, stakeholder engagement, capacity building, digital solutions, quality assurance, sustainability, and collaboration mechanisms.

This chapter identifies the practices that can be effectively transferred or adapted to the COVE-EXSEE context. Particular attention is given to approaches that support the establishment of sustainable regional support structures, facilitate cooperation among stakeholders, and strengthen the long-term operation and visibility of existing CoVEs.

The final section of the chapter synthesises these findings by demonstrating how COVE-EXSEE integrates and extends the experience gained from previous initiatives. This analysis provides the foundation for the COVE-EXSEE Support Structure Framework presented in the following chapter.

4.1 Cove WENDT:

Cove WENDT (Centre of Vocational Excellence in Welding and Non-Destructive Testing) aims to bring together the skills of teachers and trainers from existing VET centres, research institutes and universities, industrial companies from welding sector and other stakeholders from Quadruple Helix, to create an international network of CoVEs to support the European-wide skills ecosystems.

For COVE-EXSEE, COVE-WENDT provides source for operational framework. The consortium reviewed its governance models, organisational approaches, and

practical solutions to identify best practices that can be transferred or adapted to the design of the COVE-EXSEE support structures. The following sections summarise the practices considered most relevant for strengthening collaboration among VET institutions, industry, research organisations, and public authorities within the COVE-EXSEE framework.

4.1.2 Transferable Practices Relevant to COVE-EXSEE

Governance and Operational Coordination

One of the key transferable practices identified from COVE-WENDT is its **regional governance strategy** for VET. The strategy is structured around seven measurable criteria for establishing and operating Centres of Vocational Excellence: **strategic alignment, infrastructure and resources, human resources, governance and management, financial sustainability, monitoring and evaluation, and industry and community engagement.**

Complementing this strategy, the project developed an operational framework for bilateral collaboration between VET providers, industry, and public authorities. The framework includes structured public consultations, Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), Steering Committees and Working Groups, together with quality assurance mechanisms aligned with EQAVET and ISO standards.

These governance approaches provide practical reference models for the development of the COVE-EXSEE Operational Plan, particularly in defining governance principles, collaboration mechanisms, and quality assurance arrangements for regional support structures.

Stakeholder Engagement

COVE-WENDT developed a **structured stakeholder engagement methodology** to identify the skills needs and innovation priorities of companies and other sectoral actors before establishing long-term collaboration. A structured questionnaire, developed to systematically collect information from stakeholders and map regional needs, providing an evidence base for future cooperation activities.

Within COVE-EXSEE, this methodology can be adapted as a practical tool for the regional support structures. By periodically collecting feedback from stakeholders,

the support structures can continuously monitor emerging skills needs, technological developments, and collaboration opportunities. This evidence-based approach enables targeted stakeholder engagement based on identified regional priorities while supporting the regular review and adaptation of the support structures' activities and services.

Capacity Building

COVE-WENDT developed a structured capacity-building approach to strengthen the competences of teachers, trainers, and technical specialists working within the CoVE network. One of its key initiatives was the organisation of a **multi-day, cross-partner capacity-building event**, first held in **Genoa (September 2024)**, which brought together participants from partner organisations to exchange best practices, present project developments, and discuss real-world challenges in the welding sector. This collaborative format promoted peer learning and facilitated the exchange of experience among education and industry representatives.

To complement this activity, the project implemented a **pilot continuing professional development (CPD) course in Miskolc (April 2025)**. The course was designed for teachers and trainers and focused on digital welding technologies, blended and e-learning methodologies, and green welding innovations, supporting the continuous development of vocational education professionals in line with emerging technological and industrial trends.

Within COVE-EXSEE, these practices provide a valuable reference for the design of capacity-building activities within the regional support structures. In particular, the combination of international peer-learning events and targeted professional development programmes can support the continuous upskilling of educators, trainers, and other stakeholders while facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experience between participating CoVEs.

Digital Infrastructure and Learning Resources

A single digital platform was established, bringing together knowledge-sharing resources, courses and webinars, a job board connecting companies with job seekers, and a virtual living lab.

To support digital and blended learning, the project also developed **two interactive e-learning packages** incorporating multimedia content, videos, graphics, and other digital learning resources.

Complementing these digital resources, COVE-WENDT developed **two curricula and accompanying implementation guidelines** covering both technical competences and key skills required for the digital and green transitions in welding.

Within **COVE-EXSEE**, the digital infrastructure and learning resources developed by COVE-WENDT represent valuable assets that can be transferred and utilised within the regional support structures. In particular, the curricula, guidelines, and interactive e-learning packages can serve as readily available training resources, supporting one of the core services of the support structures: facilitating access to high-quality educational materials for existing and emerging Centres of Vocational Excellence. Their transfer will enable the support structures to expand training opportunities while promoting the sharing and reuse of proven educational resources across the CoVE network.

Sustainability

To strengthen the long-term sustainability of Centres of Vocational Excellence, COVE-WENDT developed a shared funding tracking mechanism. The mechanism recorded funding pipelines, partner responsibilities, application status, and progress, providing a structured overview of funding mobilisation activities.

Within COVE-EXSEE, this practice can be adapted to support one of the key services of the regional support structures: providing guidance on funding opportunities and supporting CoVEs in identifying suitable national and European funding programmes. Establishing a shared funding tracking mechanism would also enable the support structures to monitor funding activities across the network, facilitate the exchange of funding opportunities and good practices, and support the long-term sustainability of existing Centres of Vocational Excellence.

4.2 AILEEN

The AILEEN project (centres of vocational Excellence in aerospace & defence for advanced manufacturing) (<https://aileencove.eu/index.html>) brings together a

European network of organisations representing vocational education and training providers, higher education institutions, research organisations, industry partners, and other stakeholders committed to systematic cooperation in vocational excellence. The project supports the establishment and development of CoVEs in Advanced Manufacturing for the Aerospace and Defence sectors, addressing the growing demand for qualified professionals in areas such as welding, brazing, additive manufacturing, inspection, and manufacturing coordination.

4.1.2 Transferable Practices Relevant to COVE-EXSEE

Governance, Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

AILEEN established a multi-level governance structure to coordinate the activities of its European network of Centres of Vocational Excellence. The governance model distinguishes between strategic, advisory and operational responsibilities through the Sectoral European Advisory Board, the Joint Sectoral European Steering Committee, and the Management Team. This structure supports transparent decision-making, coordinated implementation, and systematic cooperation among education providers, industry partners and other stakeholders.

Within COVE-EXSEE, these governance arrangements provide a reference for defining the governance structure of the regional support structures, particularly in relation to stakeholder representation, operational coordination and quality assurance mechanisms.

Capacity Building

AILEEN developed international staff mobilities and is preparing a capacity-building activity to strengthen the competences of teachers, trainers, and other education professionals within the CoVE network. These activities enabled participants to exchange experience, observe different educational practices, and develop both technical and pedagogical competences through collaborative learning.

One of the mobility activities focused on Welding, covering welding technologies, inspection practices, and training methodologies. The activity adopted a case study-based, peer-to-peer learning approach, enabling participants to discuss

practical challenges and exchange experiences with colleagues from partner organisations.

A second mobility activity focused on Additive Manufacturing, introducing participants to additive manufacturing technologies and industrial applications through hands-on, workshop-based learning. This practical approach allowed participants to gain direct experience with emerging manufacturing technologies while exchanging knowledge with experts from different organisations.

In addition to these mobility activities, AILEEN is designing a dedicated capacity-building programme for trainers that combines pedagogical and technical development. This integrated approach supports trainers in effectively delivering innovative and industry-relevant vocational education.

Within COVE-EXSEE, these activities provide valuable reference models for the design of staff mobility and continuous professional development programmes within the regional support structures.

Digital Infrastructure and Learning Resources

AILEEN developed a range of **training resources** to support upskilling and reskilling in **Advanced Manufacturing for the Aerospace and Defence (A&D) sectors**. The project produced modular training courses designed to address emerging industrial competence needs, enabling flexible implementation according to different learner profiles and organisational contexts.

To complement the training programmes, AILEEN developed several educational resources supporting innovative teaching and learning approaches. These include a **Work-Based Learning (WBL) Kit**, providing implementation guidelines and the supporting documentation required to organise work-based learning activities, and a **Problem-Based Learning (PBL) Kit**, consisting of implementation guidelines and case-study resources that promote learner-centred and practice-oriented education.

To facilitate access to these resources, AILEEN established the **Excellence Platform**, a web-based training hub that brings together the majority of the project's educational content and digital training solutions. The platform enables partners

and stakeholders to access learning materials through a single digital environment, supporting the dissemination and reuse of the project's outputs.

Within **COVE-EXSEE**, these digital infrastructure components and learning resources can be transferred to the regional support structures to support one of their core services: providing Centres of Vocational Excellence with access to high-quality training materials and proven educational methodologies. The modular training courses, WBL and PBL resources, and the Excellence Platform can support the sharing, adaptation, and reuse of educational resources while strengthening the capacity of CoVEs to respond to evolving industrial skills needs.

4.3 Weldnet

The **WELDNET (Network of Inclusive COVEs on Circular Material Welding and Preventive Maintenance for Socially Safe, Resilient and Sustainable Automotive Manufacturing)** project aims to strengthen regional skills ecosystems in **Circular Material Welding (CMW)** and **Preventive Maintenance Systems (PMS)** for the automotive sector. The project addresses emerging labour market needs by promoting inclusive VET, supporting both **Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET)** and **Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET)**, and fostering long-term collaboration between VET providers, industry, research organisations, and public authorities.

Governance, Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

WELDNET governance model adopts a **quadruple-helix approach**, bringing together VET providers, industry, research organisations, public authorities, and civil society to strengthen regional cooperation and skills development.

Rather than applying a centralised governance structure, WELDNET promotes **horizontal cooperation, shared decision-making, and collective ownership** within each regional ecosystem. This collaborative approach is supported by a common operational framework, an **External Quality Assurance Board**, and a transnational network body responsible for monitoring progress, facilitating knowledge exchange, and promoting cooperation between regional ecosystems. Quality assurance is aligned with the **EQAVET** framework and incorporates continuous monitoring together with peer and cross-evaluation processes.

A further transferable practice is the adoption of a **ten-level maturity model**, enabling each regional ecosystem to assess its level of development, identify improvement priorities, and plan future actions while maintaining flexibility to respond to regional needs.

Within **COVE-EXSEE**, these governance practices provide valuable reference models for establishing regional support structures that combine common governance principles with flexibility for regional adaptation. The maturity model also offers a practical approach for monitoring the development of regional support structures and supporting their continuous improvement over time.

Stakeholder Engagement

WELDNET adopts a **structured and inclusive stakeholder engagement approach**, beginning with a comprehensive mapping of regional actors, including VET providers, industry, research organisations, chambers of commerce, and public authorities. Rather than simply identifying stakeholders, the mapping process analyses existing collaboration networks, identifies cooperation gaps, and highlights opportunities for strengthening regional partnerships.

A notable practice is the use of a **value-driven engagement strategy**, where training providers are invited to join the ecosystem through access to practical support services, such as institutional self-assessment and organisational development tools. By offering an immediate and tangible benefit, WELDNET encourages early participation, builds trust among stakeholders, and creates a foundation for long-term collaboration.

The project also places strong emphasis on **inclusive participation**, actively engaging underrepresented groups, smaller training providers, and organisations located in remote areas to ensure balanced regional representation.

For **COVE-EXSEE**, these practices demonstrate the importance of combining systematic stakeholder mapping with clear incentives for participation, inclusive engagement strategies, and continuous collaboration to establish resilient regional support structures.

Digital Infrastructure and Learning Resources

WELDNET develops an integrated **digital platform** serving as a single access point for the services, tools, and educational resources provided by the regional CoVEs. A distinguishing feature of the platform is its **user-centred development approach**.

The platform integrates a wide range of services and resources, including ecosystem development tools, partnership support functions, open educational resources, training materials, and micro-credentials, creating a comprehensive digital environment for collaboration and lifelong learning.

To support vocational excellence, WELDNET also developed a structured portfolio of **micro-courses** addressing the needs of learners, workers, trainers, and policy makers in the fields of Circular Material Welding (CMW) and Preventive Maintenance Systems (PMS). The training portfolio combines technical, digital, green, and transversal competences while also including dedicated learning opportunities for vulnerable groups and specialised courses for trainers and policy makers.

A further innovative element is the integration of **micro-credentials** based on the **Europass Digital Credentials** framework. To facilitate wider adoption, WELDNET also developed operational guidance for the establishment of certification centres, supporting the replication of the model by other education and training organisations.

Within **COVE-EXSEE**, these digital solutions and educational resources provide valuable reference models for the regional support structures. The user-centred platform development methodology, modular digital services, competence-based training resources, and micro-credential approach can support one of the core functions of the support structures: facilitating access to high-quality educational materials, digital learning solutions, and recognised training pathways while promoting the transfer and reuse of proven resources across the CoVE network.

Sustainability

WELDNET complements its diversified funding approach with a **long-term sustainability strategy** designed to ensure the continued operation of the regional CoVEs beyond the project lifetime.

The strategy is built around five complementary pillars: **continuous participation in European projects, income generation through services and certification activities, the establishment of an annual WELDNET Conference, the continuous evolution of the WELDNET digital platform, and the promotion of WELDNET services and certifications as recognised regional and national reference solutions.** Together, these mechanisms create multiple pathways for maintaining stakeholder engagement, generating income, and supporting the long-term operation of the CoVE network.

Within **COVE-EXSEE**, this approach demonstrates that the sustainability of regional support structures should be supported not only through diversified funding but also through long-term service provision, and continuous stakeholder engagement. These principles have informed the development of the COVE-EXSEE Operational Plan and its long-term vision for regional support structures.

4.4 Lessons Learned and Implications for COVE-EXSEE

The comparative review of **COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET** demonstrates that, despite their different sectoral focus and regional contexts, the three initiatives share a number of common operational principles that contribute to the successful establishment and long-term development of CoVEs..

The analysis identified several cross-cutting lessons that consistently emerged across the three projects.

Governance represents the foundation of successful CoVE ecosystems. All three initiatives established governance arrangements that promote collaboration between vocational education and training providers, industry, research organisations and public authorities, while integrating quality assurance and continuous improvement into their operational structures. This demonstrates that effective governance extends beyond organisational coordination and should provide mechanisms for monitoring performance, supporting continuous improvement and responding to changing regional needs.

Across the initiatives, **stakeholder engagement** was approached strategically to identify new partners, strengthen cooperation between education providers, industry, research organisations and public authorities, and progressively expand

the regional and European CoVE networks. Different engagement mechanisms—including stakeholder mapping, structured needs assessments, Communities of Practice, participation in governance bodies, business–education partnership agreements, and the provision of value-added services to prospective members—were successfully employed to attract new organisations and foster long-term collaboration.

This demonstrates that stakeholder engagement should be viewed as a continuous network-building process rather than a one-off consultation exercise. For COVE-EXSEE, this lesson highlights the importance of positioning the regional support structures as facilitators of collaboration, actively identifying new stakeholders, creating opportunities for participation, and continuously expanding the regional CoVE ecosystem through meaningful services and partnerships.

The review also highlights that **capacity building** is a critical component of vocational excellence. Beyond technical upskilling, successful initiatives also support pedagogical development and encourage the exchange of experience between organisations.

Another recurring lesson concerns the role of **digital infrastructure and shared educational resources**. Each project develops digital platforms that facilitate collaboration, resource sharing and access to training opportunities, accompanied by competence-based curricula, educational toolkits and digital learning materials. These experiences demonstrate that digital infrastructure should not function solely as a repository of documents but as an active environment supporting knowledge exchange, collaboration and lifelong learning.

Although addressed through different approaches, **sustainability** emerged as another common principle. The reviewed projects demonstrate that sustainable CoVEs require diversified funding opportunities, strong institutional partnerships, continuous innovation and mechanisms that enable services and educational resources to remain operational beyond the lifetime of individual projects.

Together, these findings demonstrate that successful CoVEs are built upon integrated governance, continuous stakeholder engagement, systematic capacity building, accessible digital infrastructure and long-term sustainability planning. These principles have directly informed the design of the COVE-EXSEE regional

support structures and constitute the foundation of the Operational Framework presented in the following chapters.

5. Needs Assessment

This chapter presents the evidence underlying the initial design of the COVE-EXSEE Support Structures. It synthesizes the stakeholder consultations conducted under Task 2.1.1 with the broader project evidence base, including transferable practices from COVE-WENDT, AILEEN, and WELDNET, as well as the funding landscape mapping. These consultation findings are qualitative, aimed at identifying recurring needs, implementation conditions, and regional signals rather than providing statistically representative data for each country.

Furthermore, it incorporates the findings from the interest survey outlined in Chapter 2. Together, these elements offer a comprehensive overview of both the stakeholder consultation and survey outcomes

5.1 Stakeholder Consultation

Consultation Methodology and Evidence Base

The consultation process used a common semi-structured template (see Annex 2) combining Task 2.1.1 requirements gathering with Task 4.2.2 sustainability and feasibility discussion. Only Section A of the template is used as direct evidence for this chapter. Section B concerns post-project feasibility and is used primarily to inform sustainability considerations in Chapters 9 and 10 and the related WP4 work. The consultation template consists of: (a) the stakeholder's role in the VET, industrial or regulatory landscape; (b) current skills-development and VET-quality challenges; (c) awareness of legacy CoVE outputs; (d) preferred Support Structure functions; (e) delivery and hosting preferences; (f) practical constraints; and (g) additional functions considered essential. Responses were recorded through completed consultation forms and were processed in anonymised form for public reporting, in accordance with the information and consent provisions included in the consultation template.

Evidence source	Coverage and contribution
Stakeholder consultations	13 consultation records from Romania, Greece, Serbia, Italy, Türkiye and European wide, supplemented by a European advanced-manufacturing sector perspective.
Stakeholder types	VET and training organisations; industrial companies and SMEs; research and technology-transfer organisations; certification/inspection bodies; chambers and

	ecosystem organisations; public/funding-policy actors; and sectoral associations.
Analytical approach	Qualitative thematic synthesis. Recurring issues, service preferences, operational conditions and country-specific signals were identified across responses.
Use in D2.1	To validate the common support-structure functions, identify conditions for regional adaptation, and inform the operational and governance principles in Chapters 6–9.

Interview methodology

Semi-structured stakeholder consultations were conducted using a common template under Task 2.1.1. The consultations explored organisational roles, skills and VET challenges, awareness of legacy CoVE outputs, preferred support-structure services, delivery/hosting preferences, practical constraints and additional needs. Responses were synthesised qualitatively and anonymised for public reporting.

Target groups

Consultations involved VET and training providers, SMEs and industrial companies, research and technology-transfer organisations, certification and inspection bodies, chambers and ecosystem organisations, public/funding-policy actors, and sectoral associations.

Countries

Consultation input was collected from stakeholders in Romania, Greece, Serbia, Italy, Türkiye, Portugal and Belgium. A European advanced-manufacturing perspective was also included through a sectoral association consultation.

Response analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring needs, preferred services, implementation constraints and country-specific signals. Findings were compared across stakeholder types and national contexts, then translated into implications for the support-structure framework, governance model and country operational plans. As the consultation sample is purposive and non-statistical, findings indicate needs and operational priorities rather than population-level prevalence.

5.2 Interest Survey /Matrix / Stakeholder Consultation Findings

Common priorities, Needs and Challenges

Across consultations, stakeholders prioritised stronger cooperation between VET providers, industry, research organisations and public authorities; more responsive training content for digital, green and advanced-manufacturing skills; trainer and staff capacity building; access to specialised expertise, equipment and learning resources; funding and policy guidance; innovation/R&D brokerage; and flexible qualification, certification and micro-credential pathways. A hybrid delivery model and use of existing regional capacities were generally preferred.

Despite the different institutional roles and national contexts represented, the consultations show a consistent pattern of needs. The central challenge is not only the availability of training, but the capacity of VET and skills systems to respond quickly to changing industrial requirements and to connect relevant actors around practical solutions.

Recurring need or challenge	Implication for the Support Structure
Rapid technological and skills change	Training content, curricula and continuing professional development need more frequent updating in areas such as digital manufacturing, automation, robotics, AI, welding, NDT, green and circular production.
Education–industry disconnect	The Support Structure should organise dialogue, matchmaking, work-based learning contacts and feedback mechanisms so that training provision responds to real industrial requirements.
Access to specialised resources	Many stakeholders require easier access to equipment, laboratories, technical experts, digital learning tools and industry-specific training opportunities. The structure should broker access to existing capacities.
Trainer and staff capacity	Teacher, trainer and technical-staff development is needed to maintain familiarity with emerging technologies, industrial practices and modern delivery methods.
Recognition and flexible pathways	Micro-credentials, modular learning, certification guidance and transparent progression routes are seen as useful complements to established VET and company-based training.

Resource and participation constraints	Limited staff time, cost and co-financing barriers, uneven digital capacity, language barriers and administrative complexity can restrict participation, especially for SMEs.
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Regional differences

For Italy: The Italian results are based on a limited sample of eight respondents and should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than representative of the wider Italian VET and industrial ecosystem. The findings are used primarily to identify emerging signals and are supported with stakeholder consultations.

Priorities vary according to regional industrial needs and institutional capacity. Romania stresses coordinated access to training, technical and certification support, funding information and research–industry cooperation. Greece highlights updated learning content and stronger links between VET, industry and research. Serbia places particular emphasis on industrial and adult training, skills intelligence, resource access and ecosystem coordination. Italy shows stronger interest in innovation brokerage, digital and green content, peer learning and sustainable co-financing. Türkiye highlights specialised industry training, education–industry cooperation, learner engagement, advisory support and constraints related to staff and budgets.

Sector differences

VET and training providers mainly emphasised updated curricula, trainer development, access to modern learning resources, certification pathways and stronger work-based learning links. SMEs and industrial companies prioritised training that responds directly to technical workforce needs, easier access to specialised training and equipment, advisory support, innovation brokerage and reduced administrative or funding barriers. Research and technology-transfer organisations stressed R&D collaboration, access to expertise, technology watch, knowledge transfer and partnerships between education, research and industry. Certification, inspection and regulatory bodies highlighted recognised qualifications, micro-credentials, quality assurance and clearer certification pathways. Public authorities, chambers and sectoral associations focused on skills intelligence, regional coordination, sustainable funding, SME support and alignment between VET, industrial-development and innovation policies.

Priority Support–Structure Functions

Stakeholders expressed the strongest and most consistent demand for functions that reduce fragmentation between education, industry and innovation actors. The consultations support the modular portfolio proposed in Chapter 7 and indicate

that the following functions should form the core common offer, with different levels of intensity according to regional demand:

- Education–industry coordination and stakeholder brokerage, including structured dialogue on skills needs, curriculum relevance, work-based learning and partnership opportunities.
- Advisory and referral support, helping organisations identify relevant training, technical expertise, qualification/certification pathways, regulatory information and competent service providers.
- Funding and policy intelligence, especially for SMEs and organisations with limited capacity to monitor European, national and regional calls or interpret eligibility conditions.
- Trainer and staff capacity building through continuing professional development, peer learning, mentoring, technical exchange and access to proven learning resources.
- Innovation and R&D brokerage, connecting VET providers, SMEs, research organisations, laboratories and technology providers around applied projects and technical challenges.
- Digital resource sharing and peer-learning networks, enabling the reuse and adaptation of legacy CoVE outputs without unnecessary duplication.
- Micro-credential, certification and modular-learning guidance, where these mechanisms improve flexibility, recognition and access to targeted upskilling or reskilling.

Delivery, Hosting and Practical Conditions

The responses favour a hybrid operating model. Digital tools, repositories and online exchange are valued for accessibility and cross-regional reach, while face-to-face activity remains important for practical training, technical demonstrations, relationship-building and hands-on learning. The appropriate configuration is therefore a hybrid service model rather than a purely digital platform or a purely physical centre.

Stakeholders generally favoured an existing trusted host or consortium-based arrangement connected to education, research and industry, rather than a newly created independent body. This supports the distributed-delivery model proposed in Chapter 7: the Support Structure provides an identifiable entry point, needs assessment, matching and follow-up, while specialist services remain with organisations that already possess the necessary competence, equipment or authority.

Regional Signals

The consultation evidence does not support identical country structures. It instead points to a common functional model with regional priorities reflecting the industrial base, institutional assets and stakeholder concerns of each ecosystem.

Country / level	Indicative consultation signals
Romania	Need for coordinated access to training, technical advice, certification support, funding intelligence and collaboration between VET, research and industry. Constraints include workload, fragmented project participation, funding uncertainty and changing regulatory conditions.
Greece	Training and VET stakeholders highlight the importance of updated learning content, collaboration between VET and industry, and access to appropriately coordinated services. The regional model should remain connected to existing education and research capacities.
Serbia	Industrial and innovation stakeholders emphasise dual and adult training, modern industrial skills, stakeholder coordination, labour-market relevance, access to resources and systematic regional skills intelligence.
Italy	Responses indicate demand for innovation brokerage, digital and green training content, micro-credentials, peer learning and flexible hybrid delivery. Stakeholders also stress the need for sustainable co-financing and continued collaboration after the project period.
Türkiye	Industrial and funding/research stakeholders point to insufficient education-industry cooperation, difficulty finding specialised training, employee and learner engagement challenges, staff and budget limitations, and a need for advisory and brokerage services.
European / transnational perspective	Advanced-manufacturing stakeholders emphasise technological change, shortages in technical and digital competences, curriculum responsiveness, practical training, trainer development, SME-accessible funding guidance and stronger industry engagement.

Awareness and Uptake of Legacy CoVE Outputs

Consultation responses suggest that awareness of COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET outputs is uneven. Some respondents were familiar with selected

resources or recognised their relevance, while others had limited prior awareness. This confirms that the Support Structures should not assume that legacy outputs are already known or directly ready for use in every context.

The outputs most frequently considered relevant include digital learning resources, modular training materials, micro-credential frameworks, trainer-development resources, industry-oriented methodologies, collaborative platforms and guidance supporting cooperation between education, research and industry. Their transfer should therefore include communication, selection, contextual adaptation, translation where necessary, trainer preparation and links with recognised qualification or certification pathways.

Implications for the Operational Plan

The consultation findings directly support the design choices set out in Chapters 6–9. First, the Support Structures should function as coordination and brokerage mechanisms rather than as parallel training providers. Second, the service portfolio should remain modular, allowing regions to prioritise functions that respond to verified local demand. Third, governance must include structured industry participation and mechanisms for regular needs feedback. Fourth, resource sharing, hybrid delivery and the use of existing capacities should be preferred to creating duplicate infrastructure. Finally, funding intelligence and sustainability planning should be embedded from the outset because limited staff capacity, short-term funding and uncertain stakeholder commitment are recurrent implementation risks.

Consultation finding	Operational-plan response
Need for stronger education–industry cooperation	Stakeholder advisory arrangements, partnership brokerage, working groups and a clear coordination function.
Need for responsive skills provision	Skills intelligence, periodic needs review, curriculum/resource adaptation and trainer development.
Need for accessible specialised support	Request intake, needs assessment, matching and referral to existing experts, laboratories, training bodies and qualification actors.
Need for flexibility and inclusion	Hybrid delivery, modular services, digital access complemented by practical face-to-face activity, and attention to SME constraints.

Need for continuity beyond project funding	Diversified funding intelligence, distributed delivery, use of existing host capacities, and formalised partnerships where appropriate.
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5.3 Main Findings

5.3.1 Technical Skill Priorities

The survey and stakeholder consultations confirm that the COVE-EXSEE Support Structures should focus on a common technical scope while allowing regional differentiation. Across the participating ecosystems, the most relevant priority areas are digital skills for manufacturing, welding technologies, non-destructive testing (NDT), and green/circular manufacturing competences.

Romania shows strongest demand for digital manufacturing skills, welding and green/circular competences. Greece prioritises digital skills, NDT and green skills. Serbia requires support mainly in digital skills, NDT and welding, including circular-material welding. Türkiye identifies welding, NDT and digital manufacturing as its principal technical priorities. In Italy, the survey results—interpreted as indicative because of the limited sample—highlight digital manufacturing and green/circular skills, together with applied and work-based learning approaches.

5.3.2 Operational Training Challenges

The evidence identifies several recurring barriers affecting the ability of VET providers, SMEs and other stakeholders to respond to evolving skills needs. These include the need to update curricula and training content more rapidly; limited access to specialised equipment, laboratories and digital tools; insufficient cooperation between education, industry, research and public authorities; difficulty attracting or retaining qualified trainers; and weak links between training provision and actual labour-market requirements.

The regional evidence also identifies specific barriers to scaling training activities: infrastructure and equipment costs in Romania; limited funding, shortage of qualified trainers and insufficient policy support in Greece; resource-access constraints, equipment shortages and trainer availability in Serbia; and funding, infrastructure, certification-route and standards-related constraints in Türkiye. In Italy, the main operational issues concern coordination between organisations with different priorities, internal fragmentation and differences between public-sector approval cycles and private-sector timelines.

5.3.3 Level of Interest in Specific CoVE Project Outputs

Interest is concentrated around practical, transferable outputs that can be used or adapted to strengthen training delivery. Across the survey and consultations, the most relevant resources are Modular NDT Curricula, AR/VR Welding Simulators, Circular-maintenance Learning Modules and the EU Micro-credential Framework.

Romania shows particular interest in Modular NDT Curricula, Circular-maintenance Learning Modules and the EU Micro-credential Framework. Greece identifies Modular NDT Curricula, AR/VR Welding Simulators, Social Inclusion Guidelines for NEET learners and the EU Micro-credential Framework as especially relevant. Serbia highlights Modular NDT Curricula, AR/VR Welding Simulators and Circular-maintenance Learning Modules. Türkiye expresses interest in Modular NDT Curricula, AR/VR Welding Simulators, Circular-maintenance Learning Modules and micro-credential approaches. Italian respondents additionally value applied learning resources, work-based learning, mobility opportunities and collaborative digital platforms.

5.3.4 Essential Resources and Support Measures

The findings indicate that training content alone is insufficient. Stakeholders require supporting conditions that enable training resources to be accessed, adapted and used effectively. The most important measures are staff and trainer capacity building, access to laboratories, equipment and demonstration facilities, best-practice sharing, industry engagement, work-based learning support, recognised certification and accreditation pathways, funding guidance, and access to ready-to-use digital learning materials.

The evidence also supports the establishment of accessible coordination and brokerage functions. These should help stakeholders identify suitable training opportunities, technical experts, laboratories, qualification routes, funding opportunities and cooperation partners. Digital tools—including knowledge portals, expert directories, funding databases, learning-management systems and helpdesks—should complement, rather than replace, direct cooperation and practical face-to-face activity.

5.3.5 Adopting or Adapting Outputs (Actionable Intent)

The results indicate clear potential for the transfer of legacy CoVE outputs, but not for simple replication. Stakeholders require support to identify relevant resources, understand their practical applicability, adapt them to regional training and qualification contexts, prepare trainers, and connect them with recognised certification or progression pathways.

Accordingly, the Support Structures should facilitate access to the most relevant COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET outputs through a structured process of selection, contextual adaptation, trainer support, resource sharing and stakeholder feedback. During the pilot phase, each regional Support Structure should test the outputs most relevant to its priority areas and operational conditions, while recording uptake, user feedback, required adaptations and potential for longer-term use.

5.4 Interest Matrix for the Transfer and Use of Legacy CoVE Outputs

The Interest Matrix translates the survey and stakeholder-consultation findings into practical priorities for each Support Structure. It identifies the technical areas, legacy CoVE outputs, enabling resources and pilot actions most relevant to each regional ecosystem. The matrix is intended to guide the selection, adaptation and testing of resources during implementation, rather than to prescribe identical services in all countries.

Regional Support Structure	Main technical priorities	Legacy CoVE outputs/resources of strongest interest	Essential support measures	Actionable intent during pilot
Romania	Digital manufacturing; welding; green and circular competences	Modular NDT curricula; circular-maintenance learning modules; EU micro-credential framework	Access to technical expertise, laboratories and certification support; funding intelligence; research-industry cooperation	Select and adapt relevant modular resources; connect them with technical facilities, trainers and recognised qualification pathways
Greece	Digital skills; NDT; green skills	Modular NDT curricula; AR/VR welding simulators; social-inclusion guidance for NEET learners; EU micro-credential framework	Updated learning content; trainer development; education-industry-research cooperation; access to coordinated services	Test selected digital and NDT-oriented resources, supported by trainer preparation and local stakeholder partnerships
Serbia	Digital skills; NDT; welding, including circular-	Modular NDT curricula; AR/VR welding simulators; circular-	Industrial and adult-training links; skills intelligence; access to	Adapt and trial resources relevant to industrial and adult-learning

	material welding	maintenance learning modules	equipment and experts; regional coordination	needs, using the Support Structure to connect providers, companies and technical capacities
Türkiye	Welding; NDT; digital manufacturing	Modular NDT curricula; AR/VR welding simulators; circular-maintenance learning modules; micro-credential approaches	Specialised training access; education-industry cooperation; advisory support; funding and resource guidance	Facilitate access to suitable providers, laboratories, trainers and qualification routes; test resources according to industry demand and available capacity
Italy	Digital manufacturing; green and circular skills; applied and work-based learning	Applied learning resources; work-based learning resources; mobility opportunities; collaborative digital platforms; micro-credential guidance	Innovation brokerage; peer learning; sustainable co-financing; hybrid delivery; links between training, work experience and employment	Pilot network-delivered learning and innovation-support activities, validate relevance with users and refine the model through stakeholder feedback
Transnational mechanism European	Cross-regional qualification, training-pathway and cooperation needs	EFW qualification resources; legacy CoVE knowledge resources; European peer-learning and cooperation tools	Access to ANB/ATB networks, European experts, funding intelligence and cross-regional exchange	Match regional requests with relevant European resources, qualification actors, experts and cooperation opportunities

The Interest Matrix confirms that stakeholders show strongest interest in practical and transferable resources that can strengthen training delivery, technical capacity and recognised learning pathways. The findings do not support a uniform transfer model. Instead, each Support Structure should select, contextualise and test the resources most relevant to its regional priorities, available capacity and

stakeholder demand. The pilot phase will record uptake, required adaptations, user feedback and potential for longer-term integration within the regional ecosystem.

6. Conceptual Framework for Support Structures

The COVE-EXSEE Support Structure should be understood primarily as an **enabling mechanism**. Its role is not to replace the activities of VET institutions, companies, CoVEs or public authorities, but to improve the connections between them and make existing expertise, training opportunities, technological resources and funding pathways easier to access and use (see Figure 4).

This understanding also reflects the lessons derived from COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET. The review of these projects indicates that effective transfer requires more than making learning materials available. Regional structures may need to broker access to specialised facilities and expertise, support localisation and trainer preparation, connect modular learning with recognised qualifications and progression routes, and integrate green-transition and inclusion considerations into service delivery.

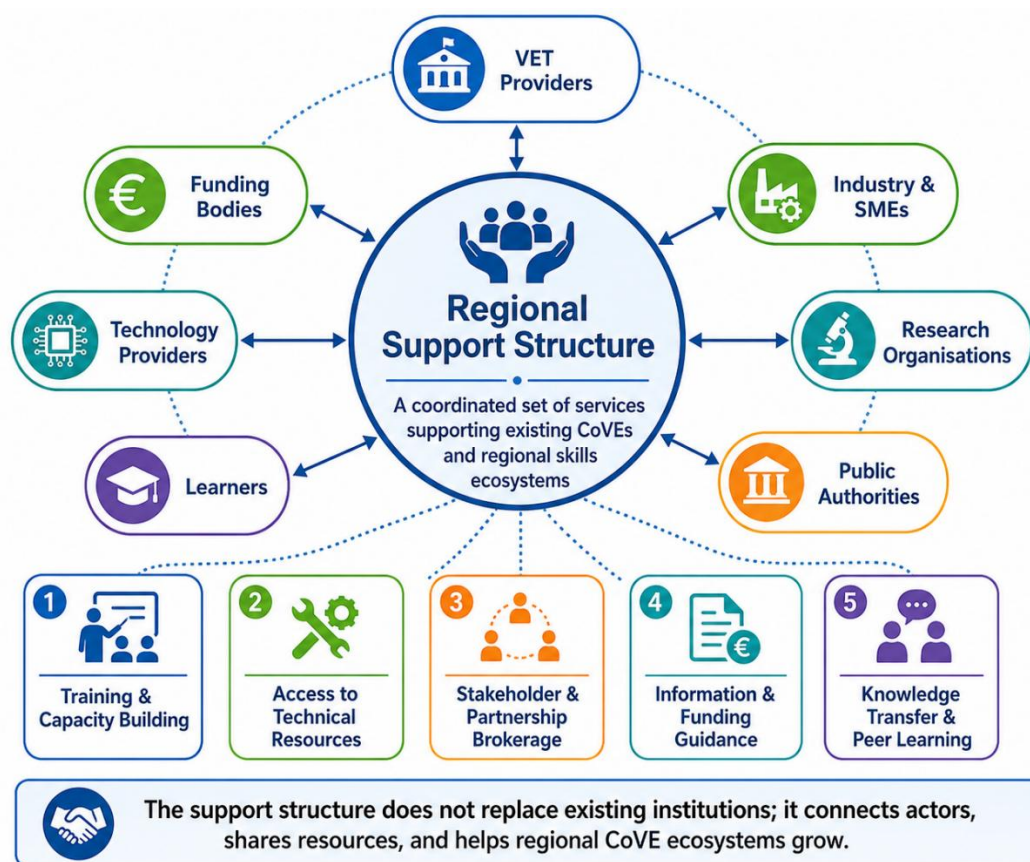


Figure 3: Conceptual framework of support structure

6.1 Strategic Framework of the COVE-EXSEE Support Ecosystem

The framework is structured around a shared vision, mission, objectives and operating principles, leading to a set of expected impacts for vocational excellence at regional level.

Vision

Connected and sustainable regional skills ecosystems in which vocational education and training providers, industry, research organisations and public authorities collaborate effectively to respond to technological, economic and skills transitions.

The vision reflects the broader ambition of COVE-EXSEE to strengthen vocational excellence by improving the conditions in which existing CoVEs and regional stakeholders cooperate, exchange knowledge and mobilise resources.

Mission

To enable existing CoVEs and regional stakeholders to access, connect, adapt and use the expertise, resources, partnerships and opportunities required to strengthen vocational excellence within their regions.

Its mission is to make relevant resources and expertise easier to access, facilitate cooperation between actors and support the transfer of proven CoVE practices into different regional contexts.

Objectives

The COVE-EXSEE Support Structures pursue five interconnected objectives:

- 01-** Strengthen regional cooperation and ecosystem development by connecting VET providers, industry, research organisations, public authorities and other relevant stakeholders around shared skills and innovation priorities.
- 02-** Improve access to knowledge, expertise and resources by facilitating the use of training materials, specialised facilities, technical expertise, digital tools and other resources available within the wider CoVe ecosystem.
- 03-** Support capacity building and knowledge transfer by enabling trainers, VET professionals and organisations to access peer learning, training opportunities and transferable practices developed through existing CoVE initiatives.
- 04-** Increase responsiveness to regional skills and industrial needs by creating mechanisms through which stakeholder needs, technological developments and emerging competence requirements can continuously inform the services provided by the Support Structures.

O5- Support long-term sustainability and development by facilitating access to partnerships, funding information and strategic opportunities that can contribute to the continuation and expansion of regional vocational excellence activities.

6.2 Core Operational Principles

The conceptual framework is based on five principles.

Design Principle	Application within COVE-EXSEE Support Structures
Regional responsiveness	Services should respond to regional skills, industrial and institutional needs rather than applying an identical model in every country.
Multi-stakeholder collaboration	VET providers, industry, research organisations, public authorities and other ecosystem actors should be connected through the structure.
Use and transfer of existing assets	Existing CoVE resources, training materials, tools, expertise and practices should be adapted and reused where relevant instead of being recreated.
Accessibility and brokerage	The structure should help stakeholders identify and access relevant expertise, facilities, training, partnerships and funding opportunities.
Sustainability and adaptability	Services should be capable of evolving with changing skills needs, technologies, stakeholder demand and available resources.

These principles mean that the COVE-EXSEE model should provide a **common framework without requiring identical regional structures**. Each region may place different emphasis on particular services depending on existing infrastructure, institutional capacity, industrial priorities and stakeholder demand.

6.3 Expected Impacts

The Support Structures are expected to contribute to several mutually reinforcing impacts at regional level.

At the **institutional level**, VET providers and other participating organisations are expected to gain improved access to expertise, training resources, technical infrastructure and cooperation opportunities, strengthening their capacity to respond to emerging skills and technological needs.

At the **ecosystem level**, stronger connections between education, industry, research organisations and public authorities are expected to facilitate more continuous collaboration, knowledge exchange and joint initiatives.

At the **skills level**, improved access to relevant training resources, trainer development and industry-informed expertise is expected to contribute to more responsive vocational education and training provision, particularly in welding, NDT, advanced manufacturing and associated digital and green competences.

At the **regional development level**, the Support Structures can contribute to stronger alignment between vocational excellence, industrial development and regional innovation priorities by connecting skills development with the wider economic and technological ecosystem.

Together, these impacts position the Support Structure as a practical coordination layer that helps transform dispersed regional capabilities into a more connected, accessible and sustainable vocational excellence ecosystem.

6.4 Core Functions and Services

Based on the project concept and the evidence gathered through WP2, the Regional Support Structures can be organised around a set of interconnected services and functions.

Training and Capacity-Building Support

The structures can facilitate access to existing and newly adapted training materials, curricula and capacity-building resources in welding, NDT, advanced manufacturing, digital technologies and green transition topics.

Access to Technical Resources and Expertise

Where specialised equipment, laboratories, simulators or technical expertise already exist within the regional or wider CoVE network, the support structure can facilitate access rather than requiring every institution to develop equivalent capacity independently. The function therefore includes identifying available resources, connecting users with their owners and enabling shared use where feasible.

Stakeholder and Partnership Brokerage

A central function is to connect VET providers with companies, research organisations, public authorities and other relevant actors. This may include stakeholder mapping, matchmaking, identification of cooperation opportunities and support for the development of education–industry partnerships.

The structure should therefore contribute to the **continuous expansion of the regional skills ecosystem**, rather than engaging stakeholders only during individual project activities.

Information, Guidance and Funding Support

Regional actors may require guidance on available training opportunities, technical solutions, certification pathways, European initiatives and funding programmes. The support structure can operate as an information and referral point, helping organisations identify relevant opportunities and directing them towards appropriate programmes, expertise or authorities.

The funding mapping undertaken within COVE-EXSEE reinforces the value of this function, since relevant financing opportunities are distributed across different European, national and regional programmes and are subject to different eligibility requirements and application conditions.

Knowledge Transfer and Peer Learning

The structure should facilitate the transfer of experience between existing CoVEs and regional stakeholders. This can include peer-learning activities, workshops, communities of practice, exchange of good practices and adaptation of resources developed through COVE-WENDT, AILEEN, WELDNET and other relevant initiatives.

The objective is not simply to disseminate existing outputs, but to support their **selection, adaptation and practical uptake** within different regional contexts.

Stakeholder Ecosystem

The Support Structure operates at the intersection of several stakeholder groups rather than serving a single beneficiary.

At its core are **VET providers and trainers**, who require access to updated knowledge, learning resources, technical infrastructure and industry cooperation. **Industry and SMEs** contribute knowledge of current technological and workforce requirements and provide opportunities for work-based learning, applied projects and technology transfer. **Research organisations and technology providers** contribute specialised expertise, facilities and innovation capacity.

Public authorities and policy actors provide the connection with regional development, VET and skills policies, while **funding bodies and managing authorities** can support the identification of appropriate financing pathways. Learners remain the ultimate beneficiaries through improved access to

relevant, high-quality and industry-responsive vocational education and training.

The role of the Support Structure is therefore to provide the **coordination layer between these actors**, helping to transform individual relationships into a more connected regional skills ecosystem.

Flexible Regional Configuration

The conceptual framework does not prescribe a single organisational format for all participating regions. Depending on existing regional capacity, a Support Structure may operate primarily through a physical host organisation, a digital service, a network arrangement, or a combination of these models.

For example, one region may require stronger coordination around access to specialised training facilities, while another may prioritise trainer development, industry engagement, funding guidance or knowledge transfer. The range and intensity of services should therefore be determined according to regional demand and existing resources.

What should remain common across the COVE-EXSEE model is **the function rather than the organisational form**: each Support Structure should improve access to expertise and resources, strengthen cooperation among regional actors, support the transfer of vocational excellence practices and provide a sustainable coordination mechanism for the regional skills ecosystem.

7. Operational Model

The operational model defines how the COVE-EXSEE Support Structures translate identified regional needs into concrete support for users. The structures are intended to transform CoVE knowledge into day-to-day services for VET providers, learners, SMEs, research centres and universities, and public authorities and, test these proposed services during the pilot phase based on the received request from the real users.

The common operational principle is based on coordinated access and brokerage role with the delivery, coordination or facilitation of selected training, R&D brokerage and advisory services. A Support Structure is not expected to develop or deliver every service itself. Instead, it provides an identifiable access point, understands the stakeholder's need and connects the user with the appropriate training provider, expert, laboratory, resource, funding opportunity or other

ecosystem actor. However, if relevant capacity exists, services may be delivered directly by the coordinating organisation or another participating partner.

The exact combination of services, responsible actors and operating arrangements differs between regions and is therefore further specified in the Country Operational Plans. The common model described below provides the shared operational logic within which these regional adaptations will operate.

7.1 Service Portfolio

The COVE-EXSEE Support Structures will operate through a modular service portfolio. Not every regional structure is expected to deliver all services with the same level of intensity. The composition and emphasis of the service portfolio will reflect the needs identified through the regional evidence presented in Chapter 5, together with the capacities and institutional conditions of each participating region.

The service portfolio brings together the types of support foreseen in the proposal—training, R&D brokerage and advisory services—with additional functions identified through the interest survey and stakeholder consultation, including training coordination, staff capacitation, access to resources, certification support, funding information, peer learning and stakeholder brokerage. The list of service portfolio is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Support structure service portfolio

Service Area	Operational Scope
Training, Curriculum and Learning Support	Coordinating access to relevant training; identifying and sharing existing curricula and learning materials; supporting the adaptation and reuse of COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET resources; and facilitating access to relevant modular learning and micro-credential approaches.
Trainer and Staff Capacity Building	Connecting teachers, trainers and Support Structure staff with technical and pedagogical upskilling opportunities, mentoring, peer learning, mobility and relevant capacity-building resources, including transferable approaches and materials from COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET.
Knowledge and Resource Sharing	Facilitating access to learning resources, best practices, digital materials, laboratories, equipment, demonstration facilities, work-based learning resources and other assets available within the regional or COVE-EXSEE network.
Stakeholder, Partnership and Mobility Brokerage	Connecting VET providers, SMEs, industry, research organisations, public authorities and other ecosystem actors; supporting partner matchmaking, work-based learning cooperation, student and staff mobility, cross-regional cooperation and the

	development of education–industry partnerships, drawing where relevant on practices developed through COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET.
Career Pathways Support	Helping learners, jobseekers, workers and training providers identify relevant learning and progression pathways; connecting training with work experience, placements and employment opportunities; and facilitating cooperation with companies.
Technical, Innovation and R&D Brokerage	Connecting stakeholders with specialised experts, research capacities, testing facilities, technology providers, laboratories and applied innovation opportunities where the identified need extends beyond standard training provision.
Expert Guidance and Access to Expertise	Helping stakeholders identify and access appropriate technical, training, research, qualification or sectoral expertise through expert directories, professional networks and referral mechanisms. The Support Structure facilitates access to relevant expertise rather than replacing specialised professional or competent bodies.
Skills Intelligence and Foresight	Supporting the identification and exchange of information on emerging technologies, occupations, competence requirements and labour–market developments; bringing together intelligence from industry, education, research and policy actors; and using this information to inform future training priorities and Support Structure services.
Qualification, Certification, Policy, Funding and Consortium Guidance	Signposting relevant qualification and certification pathways, regulatory and policy developments, and national, regional or European funding opportunities. The service may also support organisations in identifying suitable consortium partners and cooperation opportunities for funding applications or joint initiatives. Formal accreditation, certification, funding decisions and grant administration remain with the responsible bodies.
Knowledge Transfer, Peer Learning and Dissemination	Facilitating exchange of successful practices between CoVEs and regions, providing opportunities for peer learning and cross-regional exchange, and ensuring that relevant training resources, operational experiences, tools and project outputs reach potential users and can be adapted to new contexts.

The common portfolio is broad enough to respond to different regional needs, while the subsequent Country Operational Plans identify the priority services to be piloted in each ecosystem.

7.2 Stakeholder Journey and Service Workflow

The stakeholder journey describes what happens from the moment a user approaches a Support Structure until the requested support has been provided and evaluated.

Although digital tools and helpdesks can facilitate access, the model does not require every user to log into a specific digital system. Depending on the regional configuration, initial contact may take place through a website, helpdesk, online form, email, platform or direct contact with the coordinating organisation. The important common requirement is that stakeholders have a clearly identifiable route into the Support Structure.

The workflow follows six common stages:



Figure 4: Support structure workflow

1. **Stakeholder Request:** A stakeholder—such as an SME, VET provider, trainer, learner or other ecosystem actor—contacts the Support Structure and explains the support required.
2. **Needs assessment:** The coordinating function reviews the request and clarifies the underlying need. This stage ensures that the user is not simply directed towards a generic service, but that the technical, training, organisational or cooperation requirement is sufficiently understood before a response is proposed.
3. **Matching and Referral:** The Support Structure identifies the most appropriate existing service, resource or actor.

4. **Support Definition:** The user and relevant service provider clarify what support will be provided and how it will be implemented.
5. **Service Delivery or Implementation:** The identified service is delivered by the appropriate actor. The Support Structure may coordinate or facilitate this stage, while specialist services remain with the competent organisation.
6. **Follow-up and Feedback:** Following the service, the Support Structure collects feedback and determines whether the original need was addressed or whether additional support is required. Feedback also provides evidence for improving the service portfolio and identifying recurring needs within the regional ecosystem.

The flow should not be interpreted as a rigid administrative procedure. Straightforward requests may be resolved through immediate information or referral, whereas more complex training, innovation or partnership needs may require several actors and additional coordination.

The Country Operational Plans presented in the following chapter apply this common service portfolio and workflow to the specific needs and capacities identified in partner countries.

8. Governance Model

The governance model defines how the COVE-EXSEE Support Structures are coordinated, how stakeholders contribute to their strategic direction, how operational and strategic decisions are taken, and how accountability, monitoring and continuous improvement are maintained. The CoVE EXSEE support structure governance model is built on the existing governance strategies of COVE WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET CoVEs.

The project foresees support structures that connect VET providers, industry, research organisations, public authorities and other relevant ecosystem actors through mechanisms such as advisory arrangements, working groups and shared platforms.

Accordingly, the COVE-EXSEE governance model defines a **common set of governance functions**, the same functions may therefore be organised through different bodies or arrangements depending on the regional context.

For example, in one region strategic decision-making and stakeholder advisory functions may be performed by a single multi-stakeholder governing body, while another region may maintain a smaller governing group complemented by a wider stakeholder forum. Working Groups may be established where

specialist or temporary input is required but do not need to operate as permanent bodies.

8.1 Governance Principles

The common governance model is based on six principles.

- 1. Multi-stakeholder participation:** VET providers, industry, research organisations, public authorities and other relevant actors should have appropriate opportunities to contribute to the direction and development of the Support Structure.
- 2. Clear coordination:** Each Support Structure should have an identifiable coordinating organisation or coordination function responsible for day-to-day organisation, communication, request routing, monitoring and reporting.
- 3. Clear separation of governance functions:** Strategic decision-making, stakeholder advice, operational coordination and specialist service delivery represent different functions. However, these functions do not necessarily require separate permanent bodies.
- 4. Distributed responsibility:** The coordinating organisation is not expected to deliver all services. Training, technical support, work-based learning, research, testing, qualification guidance and other specialist services may be provided by organisations within the wider ecosystem.
- 5. Proportionate and flexible governance:** Governance arrangements should be appropriate to the size, maturity and institutional characteristics of each regional ecosystem. Additional committees or permanent structures should only be created where they add operational value.
- 6. Accountability and continues improvements:** Service use, stakeholder feedback, operational issues, risks and results should be monitored and periodically reviewed so that the Support Structure can adapt throughout pilot implementation.

8.2 Governance Lessons from Existing CoVEs

The COVE-EXSEE governance model also draws on transferable governance practices identified through **COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET**.

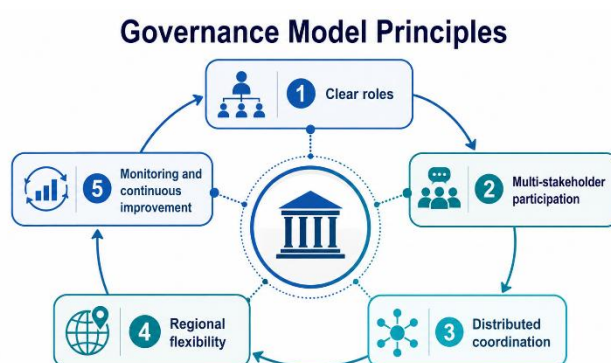
COVE-WENDT demonstrates the value of combining strategic governance with structured cooperation mechanisms. Its approach links governance and management with stakeholder engagement, monitoring and evaluation,

resources and sustainability, while mechanisms such as steering arrangements and thematic Working Groups support practical coordination.

AILEEN provides a useful example of differentiating between advisory, strategic decision-making and operational management functions. This distinction is particularly relevant to COVE-EXSEE because it helps prevent the operational coordinator from becoming the sole decision-maker while avoiding unnecessary involvement of strategic bodies in routine service delivery.

WELDNET contributes the principle of horizontal multi-stakeholder cooperation and regional flexibility within a common framework. Its regional ecosystems combine local coordination with wider cooperation, common quality mechanisms and continuous review.

Together, the three experiences support five transferable governance features:



COVE-EXSEE does not therefore reproduce the governance structure of any individual legacy project. Instead, these transferable practices inform a common governance architecture that can be configured differently according to the institutional environment of each Support Structure. The current draft already identifies these complementary lessons as a basis for the COVE-EXSEE model.

8.3 Common Governance Architecture

Within this project-level framework, each Support Structure should ensure that the following functions are covered:

1. Strategic direction and decision-making
2. Stakeholder representation and advisory input
3. Operational coordination
4. Specialist and service-delivery capacity

5. Monitoring, feedback and quality improvement

These are **governance functions, not mandatory separate organisational bodies**.

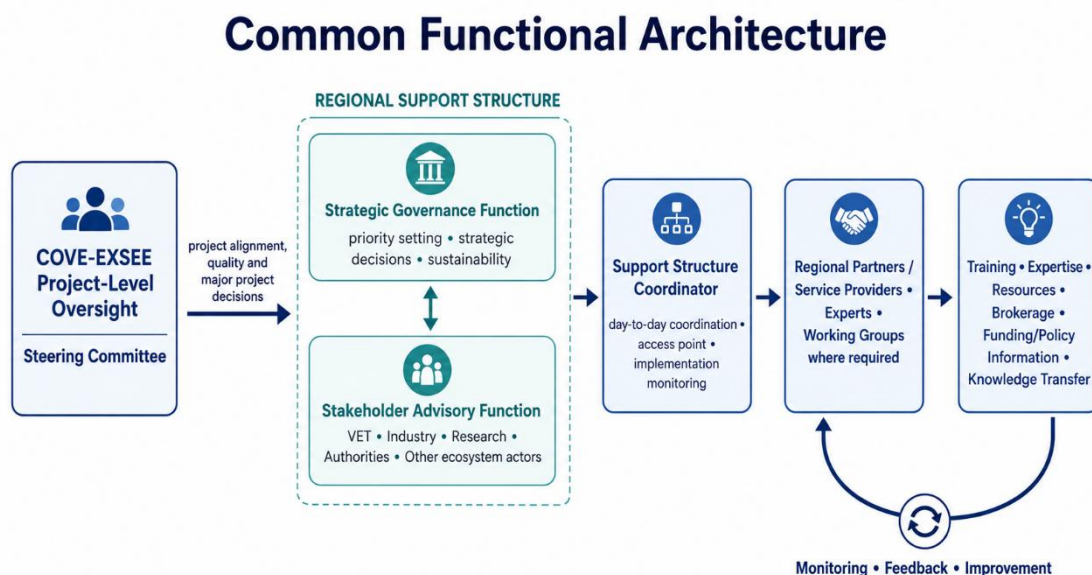


Figure 5: COVE EXSEE support structure governance model

The Strategic Governance and Stakeholder Advisory functions may be organised through separate bodies or combined within the same multi-stakeholder governance arrangement according to the regional context. Working Groups are established only where required.

8.4 Governance Functions and Responsibilities

This chapter explains the functions and responsibilities of support structures.

8.4.1 Strategic Governance Function

Each Support Structure should have an arrangement through which strategic direction and major regional decisions can be discussed and agreed.

Depending on the regional configuration, this function may be performed by the following parties, and their responsibilities are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Strategic governance parties and their responsibilities

Decision-maker	Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governing Board Steering Group multi-stakeholder consortium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing regional priorities and emerging needs

- Advisory/Governing Committee
- equivalent existing regional governance mechanism
- agreeing the overall direction of the service portfolio
- reviewing implementation progress
- discussing major partnerships
- addressing significant operational barriers
- considering resource and sustainability requirements
- reviewing risks and monitoring information
- deciding on substantial adaptations to the regional model.

8.4.2 Stakeholder Advisory and Representation Function

The governance model should provide stakeholders with an appropriate channel to contribute needs, expertise and feedback.

Relevant actors may include:



Stakeholder input may be organised through representation in the governing body itself, through a wider stakeholder forum, consultation meetings, thematic groups or other appropriate mechanisms.

A separate permanent Advisory Board is therefore **not mandatory** where stakeholder representation is already adequately integrated into another governance arrangement.

This flexibility is important because the Country Operational Plans reflect different ecosystem structures and levels of institutional maturity.

8.4.3 Support Structure Coordinator

Every Support Structure should have a clearly identifiable coordinating organisation or coordination function.

Its responsibilities include:

- acting as the identifiable operational entry point;
- receiving and coordinating stakeholder requests;
- managing matching and referral processes;
- maintaining communication among participating organisations;
- coordinating agreed activities;
- organising governance meetings where required;
- maintaining basic operational records;
- collecting stakeholder feedback;
- identifying emerging needs and operational problems;
- monitoring risks; and
- reporting relevant implementation information through WP2.

8.4.4 Regional Partners and Service Providers

Regional partners form the operational delivery network of the Support Structure and their expected contributions are listed in Table 3.

Partners	Contributions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VET providers • Universities • Research organisations • Industry • Laboratories • Training bodies • Chambers • Clusters • Regional development organisations • Qualification bodies • Professional organisations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • training and learning opportunities • communicating current and emerging skills needs; • providing feedback on training relevance; • contributing to curriculum and training discussions; • trainers and specialist experts • laboratories, equipment and demonstration facilities • work-based learning opportunities • technical and research expertise • innovation and R&D capacity

- Public and Regional Authorities
- mentoring and peer learning
- career and mobility opportunities
- qualification or certification information
- participation in joint activities and events
- information on policy and regulatory developments
- alignment with regional and national skills strategies
- guidance concerning qualification and recognition frameworks
- information on public funding opportunities
- participation in policy dialogue and roundtables
- identification of institutional barriers
- support for the mainstreaming or continuation of successful approaches

8.5 Working Groups and Expert Input

Working Groups are a **flexible support mechanism rather than a mandatory permanent governance layer**.

They may be established when a topic requires focused specialist cooperation, for example:

- welding or NDT;
- digital and green skills;
- trainer development;
- qualification or micro-credential pathways;
- work-based learning;
- industry collaboration;

- funding;
- policy or regulatory issues; or
- specific pilot activities.

Membership should depend on the expertise required.

8.6 Decision-Making and Escalation

Decision-making should follow the principle that decisions are taken at the **lowest appropriate level**.

Operational level: Routine stakeholder requests, referrals, scheduling and day-to-day coordination are managed by the Support Structure Coordinator together with the relevant service provider.

Technical or specialist level: Technical questions are addressed through the relevant expert, service provider or Working Group where established.

Regional strategic level: Decisions concerning regional priorities, major partnerships, substantial service changes, governance arrangements and sustainability are addressed through the regional strategic governance function.

8.7 Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

Quality assurance should be embedded within the operation of the Support Structures and aligned with the wider COVE-EXSEE quality framework rather than creating a separate parallel quality system.

At Support Structure level, quality and continuous improvement should operate through four interconnected mechanisms:

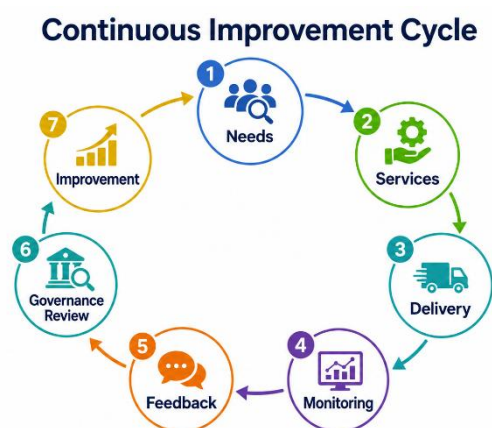
1. Service monitoring: Requests, referrals and service delivery are recorded to determine whether the Support Structure is functioning as intended.

2. User and stakeholder feedback: Feedback is collected to assess whether the support provided addressed the identified need and to identify additional requirements.

3. Risk and performance review: Operational issues, recurring bottlenecks, resource constraints and risks are reviewed through the relevant governance arrangement.

4. Adaptation and continues improvement: Services, workflows, partnerships and resource arrangements may be adjusted on the basis of evidence generated during pilot implementation.

The resulting governance cycle is:



8.8 Relationship with the Country Operational Plans

The common governance model establishes **minimum governance functions**, not a single institutional template.

All Support Structures should therefore ensure:

Core Governance Functions



How these functions are organised may differ.

This functional approach ensures consistency between the common COVE-EXSEE governance framework and the different arrangements presented in the Country Operational Plans. It also allows governance structures to evolve during the pilot phase if implementation experience demonstrates that responsibilities, stakeholder participation or coordination mechanisms need to be adjusted.

9. Country Operational Plans

Following the common conceptual, operational and governance frameworks presented in the previous chapters, the COVE-EXSEE Support Structures are

adapted to the specific needs, capacities and stakeholder ecosystems of each participating region.

The Country Operational Plans translate the evidence presented in Chapter 5 into region-specific service portfolios and operating arrangements. In particular, the identified technical skills needs, operational challenges, barriers to training uptake, demand for existing CoVE resources and requirements for longer-term capacity are reflected in the functions proposed for each Support Structure.

The proposed service portfolios identify the range of services considered relevant and appropriate to each regional context based on the needs and conditions identified through the evidence presented in Chapter 5. During the pilot phase, these services will be progressively established and tested according to stakeholder demand, available expertise, existing resources and the participation of relevant ecosystem actors.

Consistent with the common operational model described in Chapter 7, the Support Structures are not expected to deliver every service internally. Depending on the request, support may be provided directly by the coordinating organisation or facilitated through another VET provider, expert, company, laboratory, research organisation, public authority or other actor within the regional or transnational network.

The experience generated through pilot implementation will subsequently be documented in **D2.2 – Pilot Implementation Report**, which will describe how the key features defined in this Operational Plan were implemented and tested in practice, together with user feedback, initial results and any adaptations introduced during the pilot phase.

9.1 Romania – ISIM-led Regional Support Structure

The Romanian Support Structure is designed as a **Training, Micro-credential and Qualification Support and Connecting Mechanism**, coordinated by ISIM and operating through a single coordination point linked to a wider network of VET providers, industry, research organisations, experts and public bodies.

Its operational focus derives from the needs identified in Chapter 5. The Interest Survey identifies **digital skills for manufacturing, welding technologies and green/circular skills** as the leading technical skill areas in Romania. At the same time, skills development and curricula updating, training delivery, industry collaboration and access to training resources were identified as operational challenges. Romanian stakeholder consultation also identified outdated training content, limited access to equipment and technology, insufficient VET–

industry–authority collaboration, weak links with labour–market needs and the lack of recognised micro–credential or certification pathways as relevant challenges.

The Romanian Support Structure will therefore connect the **technical skills priorities of the region** with services addressing the conditions needed to deliver and sustain relevant training.

Infrastructure and equipment costs were identified as the strongest barrier to scaling CoVE-related training in Romania, while access to laboratories and training materials was also identified as an operational challenge. The Support Structure should therefore help training providers identify and access **existing laboratories, equipment, training facilities and technical resources**, instead of requiring each organisation to develop the same infrastructure independently. Where relevant equipment is held by industry or research organisations, the structure should facilitate the connection between the resource holder and the VET or training provider.

Regulatory and compliance complexities, together with standards and certification-related issues, were also identified among the barriers to wider training uptake. The Support Structure will therefore follow relevant developments and communicate changes affecting training frameworks, standards, qualifications and certification pathways to regional stakeholders.

The survey also records interest in existing CoVE outputs, particularly **Modular NDT Curricula, Circular-maintenance Learning Modules and the EU Micro-credential Framework**. The Romanian Support Structure should facilitate access to and, where appropriate, adaptation of these resources through the COVE-EXSEE network.

For longer-term training capacity, respondents identified **best-practice sharing, accreditation by a recognised authority and capacity building of staff** among the most important support measures, alongside training curricula and ready-to-use digital training materials.

9.1.1 Mission

The mission of the Romanian Support Structure is:

To be the connecting mechanism that brings VET providers, industry, research organisations and public authorities together around welding, NDT and advanced manufacturing skills – turning identified regional needs (digital skills, NDT, green transition) into coordinated training, certification and funding pathways accessible to all stakeholders.

Particular attention will be given to the identified needs in **digital skills, welding and green/circular skills**, while support for NDT and advanced manufacturing will remain available according to stakeholder demand.

The primary beneficiaries will be:

- SMEs and industrial companies;
- VET and training providers;
- teachers and trainers.

Other learners, research organisations and public bodies may access or contribute to the structure according to the type of request.

9.1.2 Service Portfolio

1. Training Coordination and Scheduling

The Support Structure will coordinate requests for training and connect stakeholders with appropriate training providers, materials, expertise and technical resources.

Priority will be given to training needs related to **digital skills, welding and green/circular skills**, while NDT and other advanced-manufacturing needs will be addressed according to demand.

The service may include:

- identifying suitable training and curricula;
- connecting users with relevant training providers;
- facilitating access to learning materials and CoVE resources;
- facilitating access to laboratories, equipment and other available training infrastructure; and
- coordinating or scheduling the resulting training activity.

This function directly responds to the identified challenges concerning curricula updates, training delivery and resource access.

2. Micro-credential and Certification Support

The Support Structure will help stakeholders identify appropriate **micro-credential, qualification and certification pathways** and connect them with competent organisations.

This service will provide guidance on existing routes and relevant frameworks, including access to applicable approaches and resources developed through COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELNET. The strong interest in the EU Micro-credential Framework and the identified need for accreditation and recognised pathways provide a basis for this function.

Formal certification, accreditation and recognition will remain with the relevant competent or authorised organisations.

3. Staff Capacitation

The Support Structure will facilitate capacity-building opportunities for existing teachers, trainers and other staff involved in training provision.

The service will particularly support the development of capacities required to respond to the identified technical areas, including **digital, green/circular and welding-related competences**, as well as the use and adaptation of relevant training resources.

4. R&D Brokerage between VET Providers and SMEs

The Support Structure will act as a connecting mechanism between **VET providers, SMEs, research organisations and technical resource holders**.

Its role will be to facilitate cooperation where training needs require industrial input, specialist expertise, equipment, testing capacity or applied R&D. This function also provides an operational response to the identified challenge of industry collaboration and weak connections between training provision and labour-market needs.

Where a training provider requires equipment that is available in an industrial or research organisation, the structure may facilitate the necessary connection and access arrangements.

5. Policy Intelligence and Funding Alerts

The Support Structure will provide stakeholders with relevant information on:

- regulatory and compliance developments;
- standards and qualification-related changes;
- national, regional and European funding opportunities; and
- funding opportunities supporting training, equipment, capacity building, innovation and cooperation.

Where regulatory or technical developments affect existing training provision, the service should also help stakeholders identify relevant updated curricula, materials or expertise.

9.1.3 Operating Model

The Romanian Support Structure will operate through a **single-entry-point and distributed-service model**.

Stakeholders will be able to submit requests through one identifiable coordination point. The request will then be assessed and classified according to the type of support required.

The operational pathway will follow the sequence:

Stakeholder request → Needs classification → Matching and referral → Service delivery by the relevant actor → Follow-up and feedback

In this approach, the coordinator triages stakeholder requests and connects users with the relevant partner, expert or service before collecting feedback on the support received.

9.1.4 Coordination and Governance

ISIM will coordinate the Romanian Regional Support Structure.

The structure will operate through a multi-stakeholder network involving, as appropriate:

- VET and continuing-training providers;
- SMEs and industrial companies;
- universities and research organisations;
- public and regional authorities;

Strategic coordination is proposed through a governing body meeting approximately every six months, complemented by operational coordination and online check-ins when required.

Core Operational Team

Core operational team includes;

- Coordinator
- Technical expert
- Training expert and
- Funding advisor

In Romania Support Structure.

Operational Resources

The Support Structure should primarily mobilise existing resources through cooperation and referral arrangements.

Available resources may include:

- training centres;
- laboratories;
- training and meeting rooms;
- technical equipment; and
- digital platforms.

This resource-sharing approach is particularly relevant in Romania because infrastructure and equipment costs were identified as the strongest barrier to wider adoption and scaling of training.

Digital Support Layer

The physical and organisational network should be complemented by digital tools enabling stakeholders to identify resources and opportunities. The Romanian Support Structure should provide or connect stakeholders to:

- Knowledge Portal
- Funding Database
- Community Platform
- Expert Directory

These tools can support access to training materials, experts, funding opportunities and cooperation partners without creating a separate physical infrastructure for each service.

9.1.5 Recurring Activities

To keep the Support Structure active and responsive to changing regional needs, ISIM proposes recurring activities including:

- capacity-building workshops;
- innovation brokerage activities;
- policy roundtables; and
- funding sessions.

These activities will provide regular points at which training providers, industry, research organisations and public actors can exchange needs, resources and opportunities.

9.1.6 Sustainability Approach

ISIM identifies a mixed financing approach for continuation beyond the COVE-EXSEE funding period. Potential mechanisms include:

- Public funding
- Membership fees
- Service contracts
- National projects
- EU projects
- Industry sponsorship

These represent possible complementary financing sources rather than a confirmed post-project business model.

The main sustainability risks identified by ISIM are insufficient funding after the EU grant, loss of key staff and institutional knowledge, declining stakeholder engagement, regulatory or policy changes affecting training standards and technology becoming outdated without continued investment.

The Romanian model therefore combines shared existing resources, distributed expertise, diversified funding and continuous stakeholder coordination, rather than relying on a single organisation to provide and finance all services.

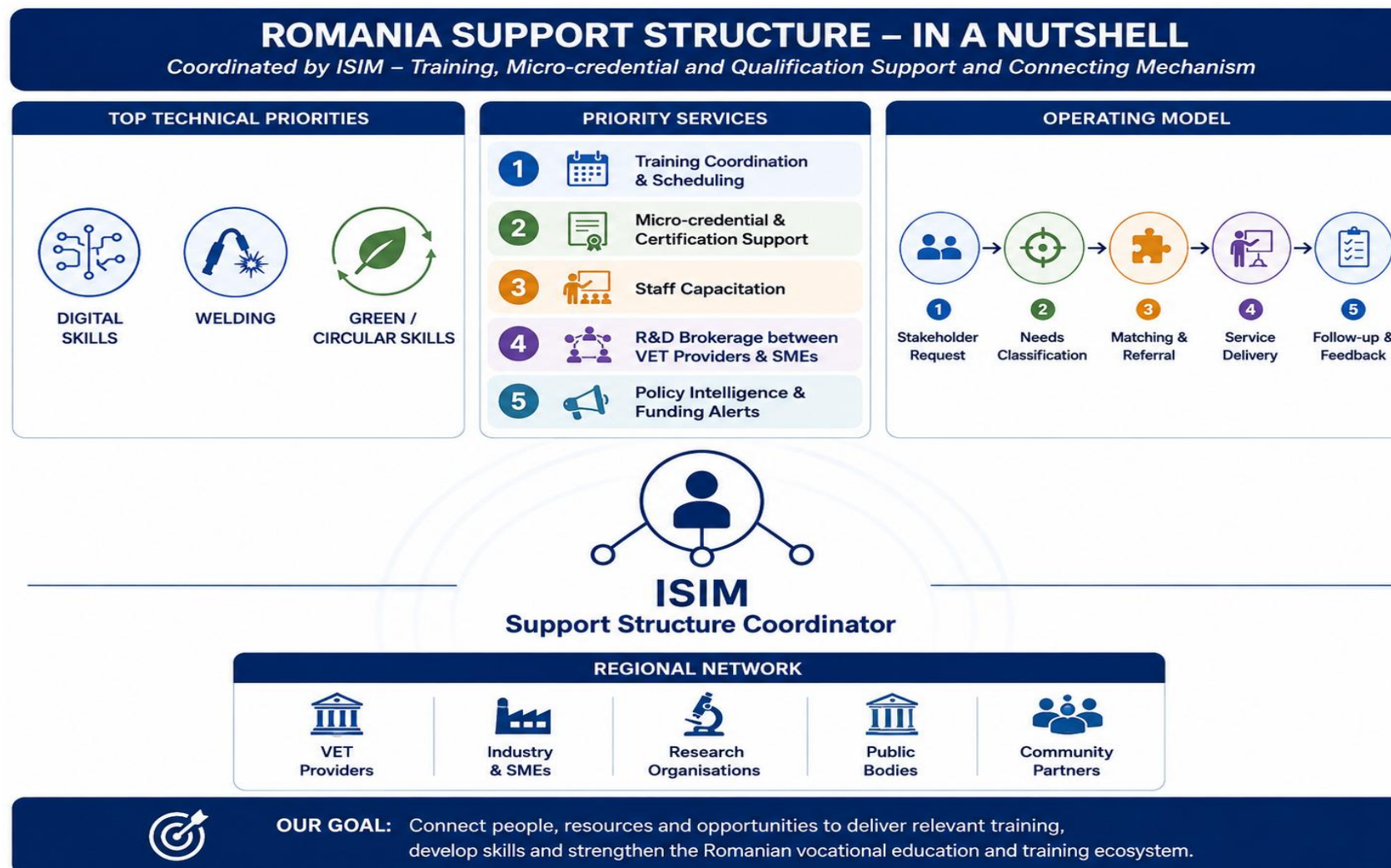


Figure 6: Romania Support Structure Operational Plan

9.2 Greece – Regional Support Structure

The Greek Support Structure is designed as a **permanent coordination mechanism for skills and innovation**, coordinated through a **small regional consortium of WELNET partners in Central Macedonia**. It will connect VET providers, industry, research organisations and public actors and provide coordinated support for the regional priority areas identified through the needs analysis.

The evidence indicates that the Greek Support Structure should respond primarily to the region's needs in **digital skills, non-destructive testing (NDT) and green skills**. In line with these priorities, the structure should support solutions to the operational challenges identified in the region, namely **industry collaboration, skills development and curricula updating**, and **training delivery**.

In addition, the needs analysis identifies **limited funding/grants, lack of qualified trainers**, and **lack of supportive policy** as barriers to the wider rollout of CoVE-related training activities. The Greek Support Structure should therefore contribute by continuously updating and sharing relevant funding opportunities, facilitating policy roundtables that bring together policy-makers and end users, and providing development opportunities for trainers, particularly in the identified priority areas.

The survey results also show interest in specific transferable CoVE outputs, especially **Modular NDT Curricula, AR/VR Welding Simulators, Social Inclusion Guidelines for NEET learners**, and the **EU Micro-credential Framework**. The Greek Support Structure should therefore facilitate access to these resources and ensure that the relevant outputs from existing CoVE projects are made available through COVE-EXSEE.

To support the long-term sustainability of CoVE activities in the region, the evidence also points to the importance of **capacity building of staff, work-based learning support**, and **career guidance support**. These findings suggest that the Greek Support Structure should not only support training delivery but also strengthen the conditions that allow training activities to continue and expand.

9.2.1 Mission

The mission of the Greek Support Structure is:

To transform fragmented cooperation in Greece into a permanent national coordination mechanism for skills and innovation in welding, NDT and advanced manufacturing and related digital and green skills.

Building on the philosophy of the WELDNET CoVE in Central Macedonia, the Support Structure would create a permanent pathway from research to practical training through knowledge intermediaries, applied demonstrators and living labs. It would connect industry needs with modular training, micro-credentials, certification, shared technical facilities and joint funding opportunities, ensuring that cooperation among VET, research, industry and public authorities continues beyond project funding.

Test of success: Greek companies actively co-design and support training programmes, while new industrial skills are incorporated into training before they become outdated.

The primary beneficiaries of the Greek Support Structure will be:

- SMEs and industrial companies
- VET providers
- students and learners

Other relevant actors, including research organisations and public authorities, will participate as contributors and ecosystem partners.

9.2.2 Service Portfolio

Based on the identified needs, the Greek Support Structure should provide the following services:

1. Training and Micro-credential Support

The structure will support the development and delivery of training in digital skills, green skills and NDT, and facilitate access to relevant micro-credential frameworks and related learning resources.

2. Work-Based Learning and Career Guidance Support

The structure will support the sharing of work-based learning resources, the networking of relevant actors for work-based learning implementation, and career guidance on which learning pathways are needed to reach specific occupational goals.

3. Trainer and Teacher Upskilling

The structure will facilitate trainer and teacher upskilling, aligned with industry needs identified in the region and particularly in the priority areas of digital, green and NDT-related skills.

4. Funding Guidance

The structure will provide guidance on national and EU funding opportunities, especially for SMEs and organisations seeking support for training, innovation or cooperation activities

5. Certification Pathways and Compliance Support

The structure will provide guidance on certification pathways, skills assessment, preparation for recognised qualifications, and applicable industry standards for welding and NDT personnel.

9.2.3 Operating Model

The operating model defined in the co-creation process should be maintained.

The Greek Support Structure will operate through a **helpdesk-based single-entry-point and distributed-service model**.

The operational pathway will follow the sequence:

Stakeholder contact → Needs assessment → Matching with appropriate experts/services → Tailored support → Follow-up and feedback

This means that stakeholders will access the Support Structure through one visible access point, while the requested service will be provided through the wider ecosystem of participating organisations, experts and facilities.

9.2.4 Coordination and Governance

The Greek Support Structure should be coordinated by a small regional consortium of WELDNET partners in Central Macedonia, consisting of:

- CETH
- Regional Authority
- YET NGO
- an industry-oriented VET provider

The governing body should meet every six months, with additional online check-ins when required.

Core Operational Team

The structure should include the following core roles:

- Coordinator

- Technical and Training Expert
- Project Officer
- Communication Support
- Funding Advisor
- IT Support

Operational Resources

The Greek Support Structure should make use of existing available resources, including:

- labs
- training rooms
- digital platform support
- demonstration facilities

9.2.5 Recurring Activities

To remain active and responsive to regional needs, the structure should organise recurring activities such as:

- capacity-building workshops
- mentoring programmes
- partner matching activities
- policy roundtables
- funding sessions

These activities should help both respond to the identified challenges and bring relevant stakeholders together.

9.2.6 Digital Support Tools

The Greek Support Structure should provide or connect stakeholders to the following digital tools:

- Knowledge Portal
- Community Platform
- Expert Directory
- Learning Management System (LMS)
- Help Desk

These tools should support access to information, expertise, learning resources and collaboration opportunities.

9.2.7 Sustainability Approach

For long-term continuation, the Greek Support Structure should build on a mixed sustainability approach, combining:

- public support where available,
- national and EU project opportunities,
- collaboration with regional stakeholders,
- continued use of existing facilities and digital tools,
- and active participation of ecosystem partners.

The structure should address the barriers identified in the needs analysis by ensuring regular trainer development, maintaining updated funding intelligence, strengthening cooperation between VET and industry, and supporting dialogue between policy-makers and end users.

Greece Support Structure

Coordinated through a small regional consortium of WELDNET partners in Central Macedonia



Permanent coordination mechanism for skills and innovation

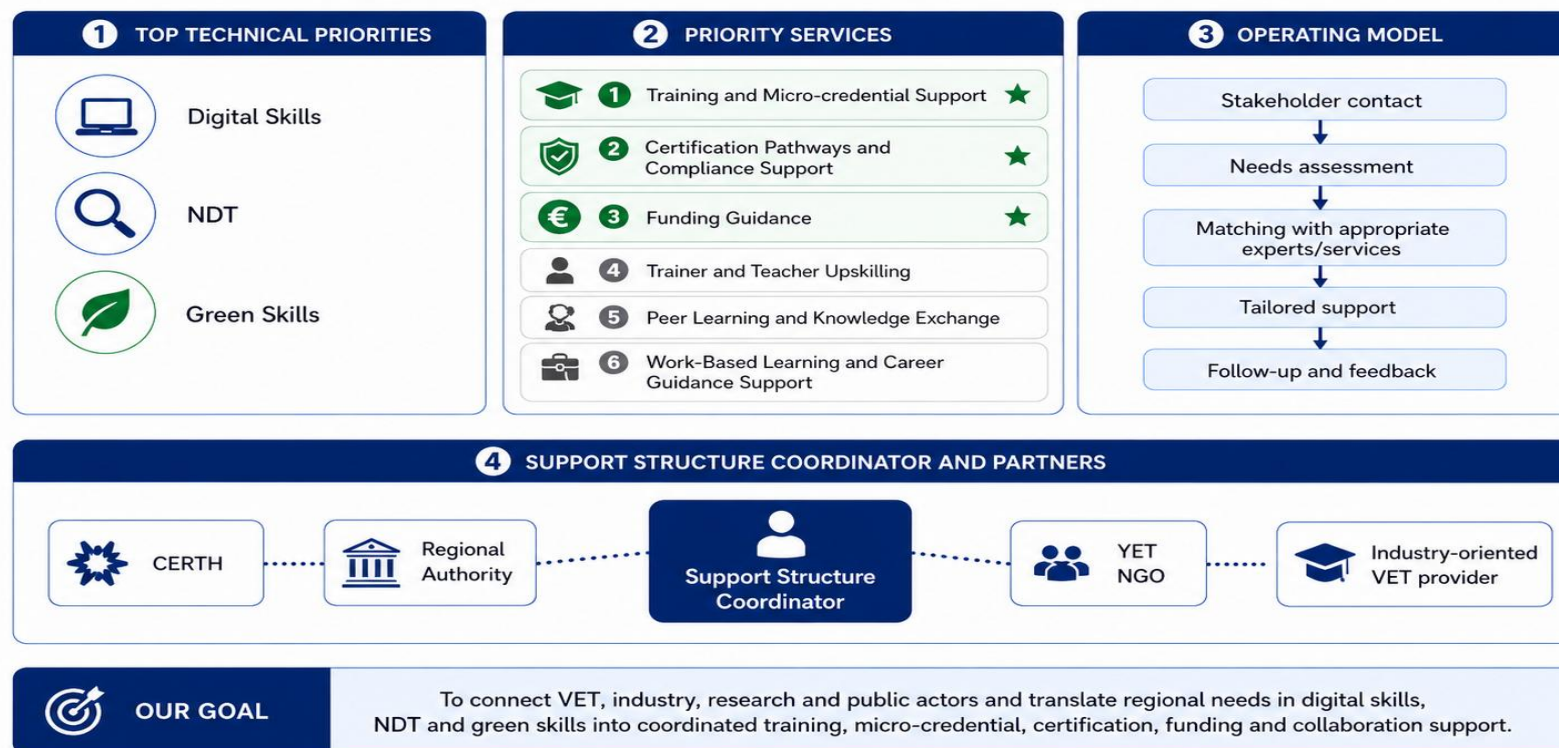


Figure 7: Greece Support Structure Operational Plan

9.3 Serbia – HELIX-led National Support Structure

The Serbian Support Structure is designed as a **light national consortium** that connects existing vocational education and training providers, industry, certification actors, research organisations and public authorities around the priority skills areas identified through the COVE-EXSEE evidence base.

Based on these findings presented in Chapter 5, the Serbian Support Structure will provide support particularly in relation to **digital skills, NDT and welding**, while also helping regional stakeholders address the identified operational challenges of **resource access, skills development and training delivery**. In addition, it should respond to the barriers that may limit the wider uptake of CoVE-related training, notably infrastructure and equipment shortages, the lack of sufficiently qualified trainers and the need for stronger policy support. This means that the structure should, where needed, facilitate cooperation between training providers and industry for the shared use of equipment and facilities, organise policy roundtables bringing together policy-makers and end users, and create access to trainer-development opportunities in the priority technical areas.

The needs analysis also shows demand for **modular NDT curricula, AR/VR welding simulators and circular-maintenance learning modules**. The Serbian Support Structure should therefore be able to provide, broker or signpost these resources, while ensuring that the COVE-EXSEE project effectively mobilises relevant outputs from previous CoVE initiatives.

For the longer-term sustainability of vocational excellence in the region, the evidence also points to the importance of **staff capacity building, work-based learning tools, and student and staff mobility opportunities**. The Support Structure should therefore help training centres strengthen their internal capacities, share work-based learning resources and create national and international connections that enable mobility and cooperation.

9.3.1 Mission

The mission of the Serbian Support Structure is:

To keep welding and advanced manufacturing skills in Serbia industry-current and internationally portable.

The Support Structure would connect sector specific SMEs, VET providers, universities, institutes and public authorities to the training, testing, technology and funding that already exist in the country, and routes what is missing to the COVE-EXSEE regional network.

It would be built on the WELDNET CoVE in Šumadija and Pomoravlje, extending scope from circular material welding for automotive to welding, NDT and advanced manufacturing nationally.

Test of success: a competence certified in Kragujevac or Belgrade is accepted in Timișoara, Thessaloniki and Ankara for example.

The primary beneficiaries of the Serbian Support Structure will be:

- SMEs and industrial companies;
- VET providers and adult education providers; and
- teachers and trainer

9.3.2 Service Portfolio

In response to the identified needs, the Serbian Support Structure should prioritise the following services:

1. **Training and micro-credentials in welding, NDT and circular material welding**, reusing the WELDNET unit architecture and aligning it, where relevant, with the Serbian National Qualifications Framework and EWF/IIW levels.
2. **Trainer and teacher upskilling**, including support for the certification of in-company instructors in cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia.
3. **Stakeholder and partnership brokerage**, by connecting stakeholders to member laboratories, NDT equipment and demonstration facilities and engaging industries for collaboration.
4. **Knowledge Transfer, Peer Learning and Work-Based Learning Support**, the Support Structure will facilitate knowledge transfer and peer learning through national and international student and staff mobility, connecting stakeholders with relevant organisations and mobility opportunities. It will also support work-based learning activities by facilitating access to existing work-based learning kits and by connecting VET providers and learners with companies or other organisations able to host practical learning activities.
5. **Certification navigation**, guiding companies and learners from a training need towards an appropriate adult education programme, National Qualifications Framework pathway, or EWF/IIW diploma through DUZS.

6. **Funding and consortium guidance**, helping SMEs and other actors identify and access relevant opportunities such as IPA III, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the Innovation Fund, Erasmus+ and similar programmes.

9.3.3 Operating Model

The Serbian Support Structure operates through a **single-entry-point and routed-service model**.

The operational pathway is:

Contact → Intake & Acknowledgement → Diagnostic → Referral → Service Delivery → Recognition / Micro-credential → Follow-up

In practice, this means that requests from companies, VET providers, trainers or learners will enter through one visible access point, be logged and acknowledged, then assessed and referred to the most relevant actor within the network. Where relevant, service delivery may lead to a certification or micro-credential route, followed by feedback and follow-up. This model allows the structure to function as a coordination and access mechanism rather than a parallel service provider.

9.3.4 Coordination and Governance

The Serbian Support Structure should be organised as a **light national consortium, not a single-owner entity**.

Its core coordination roles should be as follows:

- **HELIX** – operational coordinator and secretariat, responsible for the single entry point, case log and reporting;
- **DUZS** – certification and technical authority, responsible for the route to EWF/IIW diplomas and for training-body approval;
- **Regional anchor in Šumadija and Pomoravlje** – responsible for SME outreach and the interface with local and regional stakeholders.

The structure should involve the following ecosystem actors:

- **VET providers:** secondary technical schools and adult education providers with welding, mechanical and NDT profiles;

- **Industry:** metal processing, automotive supply, energy and process industry, shipbuilding and maintenance contractors;
- **Universities and research organisations:** faculties and institutes active in technical sciences, mechanical engineering, materials, welding technology and testing;
- **Public authorities:** Ministry of Education, Ministry of Economy, Qualifications Agency and local self-government;
- **Professional and intermediary organisations:** DUZS, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, clusters and regional development agencies;
- **Other relevant actors:** approved training bodies, accredited testing and inspection laboratories, equipment suppliers, apprentices and learners.

Board membership should remain limited to the key actors, such as **VET, industry, DUZS and the regional anchor**, while the wider set of stakeholders can participate through a broader ecosystem forum.

A full new legal entity is not required at the initial stage. The structure should start through a **consortium agreement**, with registration considered only if members later decide that a formal structure is needed. The chair may rotate every two years.

Meeting and Coordination Arrangements

The Serbian Support Structure should organise its internal coordination as follows:

- **National Board** – twice a year, in person, in spring and autumn;
- **Core Group (HELIX, DUZS and regional anchor)** – monthly, online;
- **Working Groups** – on demand, for specific themes such as NDT or trainer certification;
- **Ecosystem Forum** – once a year, open to the wider network and interested SMEs.

These arrangements should be complemented by online check-ins whenever required.

Operational Resources and Digital Tools

The Serbian Support Structure should build on existing the existing resources that can be mobilised include:

- approved training centres authorised by DUZS-CertPers;
- laboratories for welding technology, materials and NDT;
- meeting rooms made available by member organisations and regional actors;
- the WELDNET digital platform and LMS;
- demonstration facilities, including the WELDNET CoVE site in Šumadija and Pomoravlje and company shop floors used under dual education agreements.

Operationally, the structure should rely on a small core team, including:

- a coordinator;
- a training expert;
- a project officer; and
- a communication support function.

To support its functioning, the Serbian Support Structure should provide the following digital tools and services:

- Knowledge portal, preferably by reusing the WELDNET platform with a Serbian-language layer;
- Funding database, with curated information on relevant national and European funding opportunities;
- Expert directory;
- LMS, reusing the WELDNET system for micro-credential delivery and record-keeping;
- Helpdesk, with a shared inbox and case tracking;
- Equipment and laboratory registry;
- Case log, recording requests, referrals and outcomes.

A community platform may be introduced later, but the initial approach should prioritise the use of channels that members already use.

9.3.5 Recurring Activities

To remain responsive to stakeholder needs, the Serbian Support Structure should organise a regular set of activities, including:

- capacity-building workshops;
- innovation brokerage;
- partner matchmaking;
- technical advisory sessions;

- policy roundtables;
- funding sessions;
- peer-learning visits; and
- an online community of practice.

A national welding and NDT skills forum may also be organised in connection with the DUZS annual conference.

9.3.6 Sustainability Approach

The sustainability of the Serbian Support Structure should be based on a **mixed financing model**, combining several complementary mechanisms rather than relying on a single source. The main potential sources include:

- service contracts, especially for in-company training, trainer upskilling, advisory services and testing brokerage;
- membership contributions;
- industry sponsorship, especially in-kind support such as consumables, equipment loans and demonstration time;
- national projects;
- EU projects, such as Erasmus+, IPA III and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans;
- additional income linked to EWF/IIW diploma routes or hosting arrangements, where relevant.

At this stage, these mechanisms should be regarded as potential complementary sources rather than as a fully confirmed business model. Their future relevance will depend on the services implemented, stakeholder uptake and the funding environment.

Serbia Support Structure

Coordinated by HELIX
A light national consortium and connecting mechanism

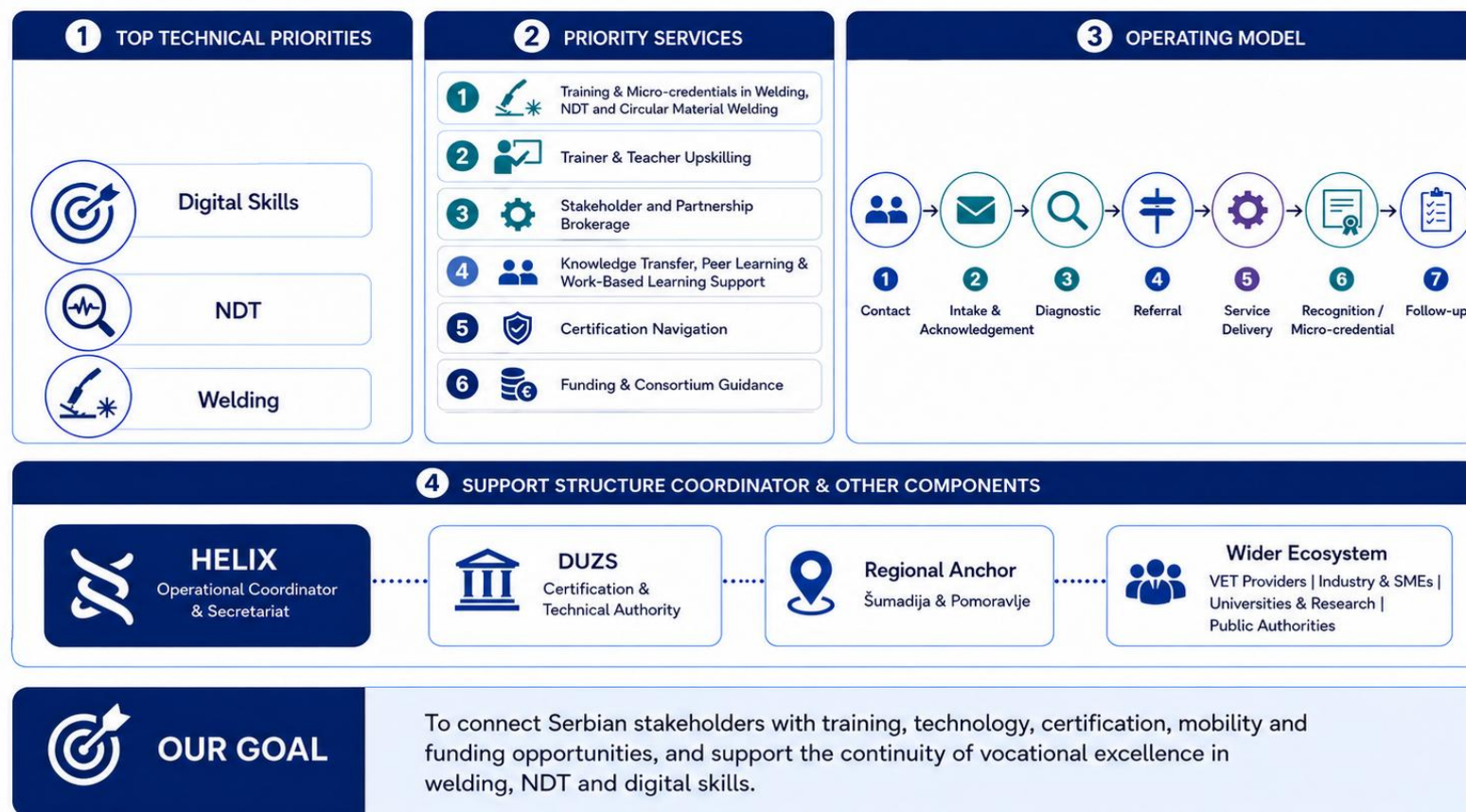


Figure 8: Serbia operational plan for support structure

9.4 Türkiye – METU-facilitated National Support Structure

The Türkiye Support Structure is designed as a **national coordination and resource-sharing mechanism** that connects VET providers, industry, universities, research organisations and public actors and facilitates access to expertise, training resources, partners and funding opportunities.

The needs analysis indicates that the structure should respond particularly to demand related to **welding, NDT and digital skills for manufacturing**. In these fields, its services should contribute to addressing the main operational challenges identified in Türkiye, particularly **resource access, skills development and industry collaboration**.

The evidence also points to the importance of **staff capacity building, applied-research resources, recognised accreditation, best-practice sharing, student and staff mobility opportunities, and updated training curricula**. The Support Structure should therefore help stakeholders access these resources, connect organisations able to provide them, and promote their adaptation and use within the Turkish VET ecosystem.

Interest was also expressed in transferable CoVE outputs including **Modular NDT Curricula, AR/VR Welding Simulators, the EU Micro-credential Framework and Circular-maintenance Learning Modules**. The Support Structure should facilitate access to these resources through COVE-EXSEE and the legacy CoVE projects.

At the same time, **lack of supportive policy, limited funding and grants, infrastructure and equipment costs, lack of certification routes and lack of approved standards** were identified as barriers to the wider uptake of training. The Turkish Support Structure should therefore combine training-related support with partnership brokerage, funding guidance, information on recognised pathways, and improved access to existing facilities and expertise.

9.4.1. Mission

The mission of the Türkiye Support Structure is:

To make cooperation easier by connecting organisations, sharing expertise and making better use of existing resources.

Priority Beneficiaries

The primary beneficiaries identified by METU are:

- SMEs and industrial companies;
- VET providers;
- universities.

Teachers, trainers, learners, research organisations, industry associations and public authorities may also participate in or benefit from the network according to the type of support required.

9.4.2 Service Portfolio

1. Training Coordination

The Support Structure will coordinate access to training opportunities, curricula and learning resources, particularly in **welding, NDT and digital manufacturing skills**.

It should help stakeholders identify relevant training provision and facilitate access to existing resources such as **Modular NDT Curricula, AR/VR Welding Simulators, Circular-maintenance Learning Modules and relevant micro-credential approaches**.

Training coordination should also support the sharing of updated curricula and facilitate staff-development activities where additional competences are required.

2. Knowledge and Resource Sharing

The Support Structure will facilitate the sharing and reuse of **training resources, good practices, curricula, applied-research resources and available infrastructure**.

Where equipment, laboratories or demonstration facilities required for training are available in another organisation, the structure should facilitate connections between the resource holder and the organisation requesting access.

This function responds directly to a challenge identified by METU: knowledge and training resources are not always shared effectively between organisations.

3. Funding Guidance

The Support Structure will help organisations identify suitable national and European funding opportunities supporting training, equipment, skills development, mobility, innovation and cooperation.

The service should also help stakeholders identify potential consortium partners where collaborative applications are required.

METU identifies funding guidance as an initial priority because organisations need support in finding appropriate funding opportunities and project partners.

4. Networking and Partner Matchmaking

The Support Structure will connect VET providers, companies, universities, research organisations and other relevant stakeholders according to identified needs.

This function should be used particularly where:

- training providers need access to industrial expertise or facilities;
- applied-research activities require cooperation between universities, VET and companies;
- organisations seek partners for training or innovation activities; or
- stakeholders require national or international connections for knowledge exchange and mobility.

METU identifies networking and partner matchmaking as one of the first services that should be implemented.

5. Expert Database and Access to Expertise

The Support Structure will maintain or provide access to an **expert directory** allowing companies, training providers and other stakeholders to identify appropriate technical, training or research expertise.

This service should enable stakeholders to locate expertise quickly when needs cannot be addressed internally.

Recognised accreditation, certification routes and approved standards should also be signposted through this function where relevant. The Support Structure will facilitate access and information rather than replace competent accreditation or certification bodies.

9.4.3 Operating Model

The operational pathway proposed by METU is as follows:

**Contact Helpdesk → Needs Assessment → Referral to Relevant Experts →
Receive Guidance → Give Feedback after the Service**

A stakeholder will initially contact the Support Structure through the helpdesk. The need will then be assessed and, where necessary, referred to an appropriate expert, training provider, research organisation or other ecosystem actor. Following the provision of guidance or support, stakeholder feedback will be collected.

This model is consistent with METU's principle that the Support Structure **should not duplicate existing services** but should instead connect organisations and coordinate access to them.

9.4. 4 Coordination and Governance

The METU proposes that:

The national CoVE coordinator should coordinate the Support Structure in close cooperation with universities, industry and public authorities.

Within COVE-EXSEE, METU will facilitate the Turkish pilot and provide the connection to the national ecosystem. The proposal identifies METU as the partner responsible for pilot implementation in Türkiye.

The Support Structure should involve:

- VET
- Industry
- Universities
- Research Organisations
- Government
- NGOs
- Clusters
- Students

The governing body should meet **quarterly, every three months**, as proposed by METU.

Core Operational Team

A compact operational team should include:

Coordinator | Project Officer | Funding Advisor | IT Support

Specialist technical, training and research expertise can be mobilised through the wider network according to the request.

Operational Resources

The Support Structure should make use of existing infrastructure and resources. METU identifies the following types of resources as relevant:

- training centres;
- laboratories;
- training/meeting rooms;
- digital platforms;
- demonstration facilities.

Digital Support Tools

The structure should provide or connect stakeholders to:

- Knowledge Portal
- Funding Database

- Expert Directory
- Helpdesk

These tools will support access to training and knowledge resources, funding opportunities, expertise and appropriate services.

9.4.5 Recurring Activities

The Türkiye Support Structure should maintain regular interaction with its ecosystem through:

- capacity-building workshops;
- technical advisory sessions;
- funding sessions;
- peer-learning visits

Capacity-building activities should particularly support staff development in the technical areas identified through the regional needs analysis, while peer-learning activities can support the exchange of good practices and the transfer of proven approaches from other CoVEs.

9.4.6 Sustainability Approach

The Türkiye Support Structure should consider a mixed financing approach combining:

- Membership
- Service Contracts
- National Projects
- EU Projects
- Industry Sponsorship

These mechanisms should be regarded as potential complementary sources rather than a confirmed post-project financial model. The precise combination will depend on the services implemented, stakeholder participation and future funding opportunities.

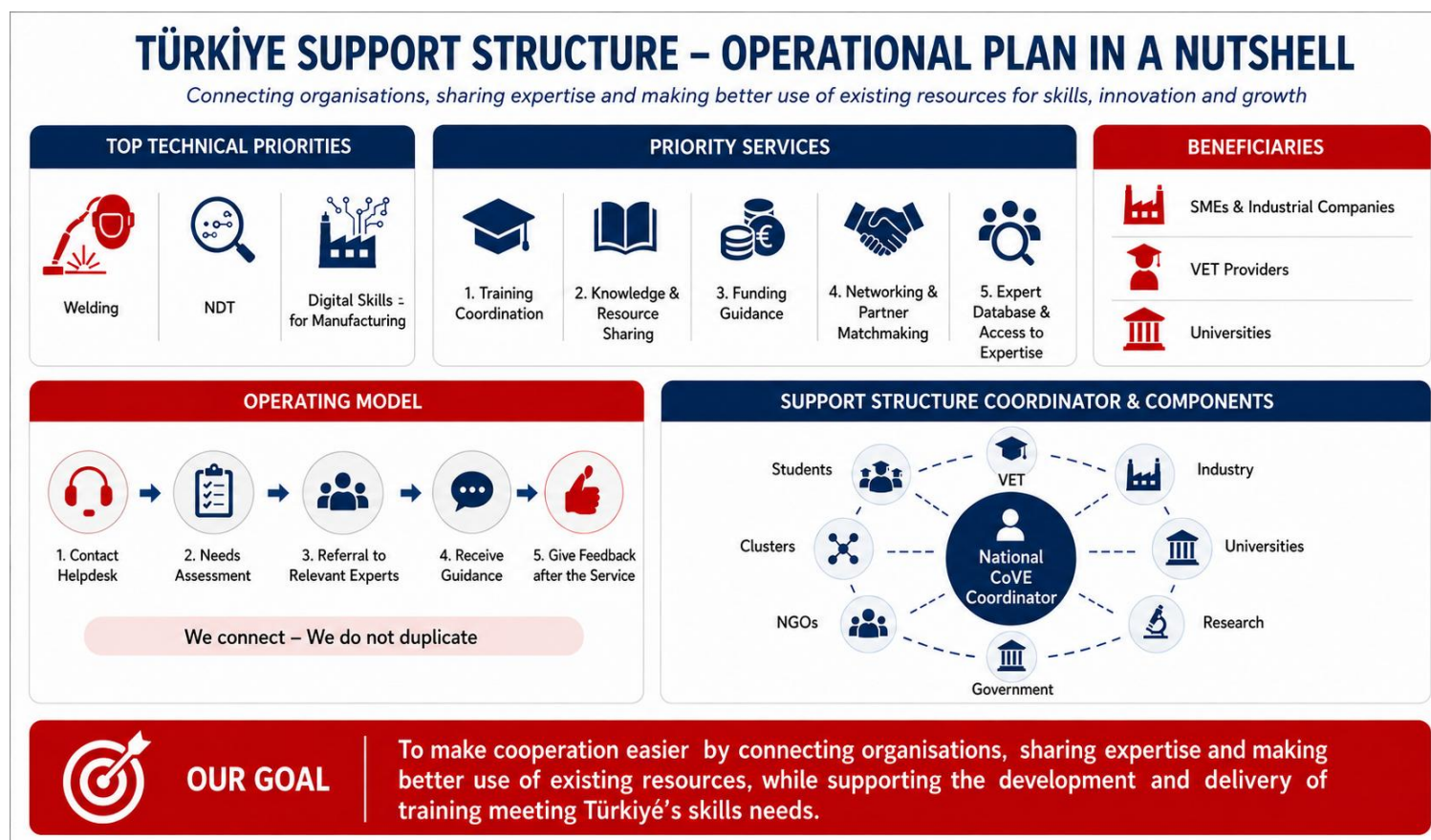


Figure 9: Türkiye operational plan for support structure

9.5 Italy – Operational Plan for the National Support Structure

The Italian Interest Survey is based on a limited sample of eight responses. Accordingly, its results are treated as **indicative signals rather than representative findings** and are considered together with the Italian stakeholder consultation and the common COVE-EXSEE framework.

Within this limited sample, particular interest was expressed in **digital manufacturing and green/circular skills**, while **industry collaboration and curriculum development** also emerged as relevant operational issues. Respondents also indicated interest in **applied learning resources, work-based learning, mobility and collaborative platforms**.

Italian partner identified three practical challenges affecting cooperation between education, industry, research and public actors: **differing organisational priorities, internal fragmentation** that can prevent opportunities from reaching the appropriate teams, and **differences between public-sector approval cycles and private-sector timelines**. The proposed Support Structure therefore places particular emphasis on connecting organisations, routing needs to appropriate actors, widening access to training and linking learning more closely with employment and innovation opportunities.

The stakeholder consultation additionally highlighted the value of collaboration mechanisms, knowledge exchange, access to funding opportunities, digital repositories, peer-learning networks and guidance related to certification and micro-credentials. A hybrid delivery format and collaborative management were also considered suitable.

9.5.1. Mission

The Italian Support Structure will provide a coordinated access point connecting VET providers, industry, research organisations, learners and other relevant stakeholders with training, expertise, and career opportunities support.

The Italian support structure mission is proposed as follows;

To sustain cooperation and dialogue between relevant organisations, broaden and diversify the training offer through the network, strengthen connections between training, work experience and employment opportunities, and support knowledge exchange and cooperation across national and international networks.

Priority Beneficiaries

The three direct beneficiary groups:

- **SMEs and industry** – accessing skills, experts, innovation support and connections with potential talent.
- **VET providers** – widening their learning offer, accessing network expertise and strengthening links with industry needs.
- **Learners and jobseekers** – accessing training, guidance, work experience and employment opportunities.

Universities and research organisations, public authorities, associations and clusters, innovation organisations and professional bodies form part of the wider ecosystem supporting delivery of these services.

9.5.2 Service Portfolio

1. Stakeholder Networking and Matchmaking

The Support Structure may activate a trusted network for specific needs, including confidential requests.

2. Network-Delivered Training and Access to Learning Resources

The Support Structure may facilitate access to relevant existing learning resources, including digital and blended materials and resources originating from COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET. Applied and work-based learning resources identified through the Interest Survey may be considered during pilot implementation and subsequently validated with users.

3. Career Pathways and Work-Based Learning Support

The Support Structure will facilitate:

- connections between learners/jobseekers and employers;
- access to placements and work-based learning opportunities; and
- links between VET providers and companies able to contribute to practical learning.

4. Innovation and Technology Transfer

The Support Structure will connect research and innovation expertise with VET providers and companies, supporting the transfer of relevant technological developments into training and industrial practice.

Within the COVE-EXSEE thematic scope, digital and green developments can be addressed through this function alongside welding, NDT and advanced manufacturing.

4.5 Skills Intelligence, Foresight and Knowledge Exchange

The structure will support the exchange of information on emerging technologies, knowledge and skills requirements.

Italian Support Structure proposes a skills-intelligence and foresight function aimed at identifying emerging innovation fields and related competence requirements. Peer-learning and knowledge-sharing activities can complement this function.

The stakeholder consultation also identified digital repositories and peer-learning networks as useful mechanisms for exchanging knowledge and avoiding duplicated effort.

9.5.3 Operating Model

The operating workflow follows the **six-step service journey developed directly through the IIS/IIW**:

Request Intake → Needs Diagnosis → Confidential Routing → Tailored Action Plan → Network Delivery → Follow-up

This workflow begins with a **single contact point**, where the stakeholder request and expected outcome are recorded. The request is then reviewed through a **needs diagnosis** to clarify whether the required support relates to skills, training, innovation, staffing or another area. Based on this assessment, the request is **confidentially routed to the most appropriate expert or participating organisation** within the network. A **tailored action plan** is then agreed, defining the scope of support, responsibilities, timing and, where relevant, commercial conditions. The required service—such as training, technical support, matchmaking or career-related guidance—is subsequently delivered by the relevant network actor. The process concludes with **follow-up**, during which the results are reviewed and any further support needs are identified.

9.5.4 Coordination and Governance

The Italian partner proposes a **VET-led, multi-stakeholder governance model**. VET actors provide the coordination function, while industry, research organisations, higher education institutions and public authorities contribute to priority-setting and the relevance of activities.

During the COVE-EXSEE pilot phase, IIS is identified in the project work plan as the Italian partner involved in operation of the national/regional pilot. IIS and IIW jointly provide the proposed configuration for the Italian ecosystem.

The proposed governance rhythm is:

- **Quarterly governing body** – strategic priorities, impact review and strategic issues;
- **Monthly operational team** – service requests, partner involvement and delivery progress;
- **Ad hoc sessions** – urgent matters and confidential stakeholder requests.

The wider governance ecosystem may involve VET providers, industry and SMEs, universities and research organisations, public authorities, associations and clusters, innovation hubs, learners/workers and professional bodies.

The stakeholder consultation proposed a collaborative consortium-based management approach and a hybrid delivery model, providing an additional perspective that can be tested during pilot implementation.

Core Operational Team

Potential human-resource functions identified as follows:

- coordination;
- project/operational management;
- communication;
- technical expertise;
- training expertise;
- funding guidance; and
- IT support.

They also identify existing training centres, laboratories, meeting spaces, digital platforms and demonstration facilities as resources available within the wider ecosystem.

Operational Resources

They also identify existing training centres, laboratories, meeting spaces, digital platforms and demonstration facilities as resources available within the wider ecosystem.

Digital Support Tools

Digital support can make use of tools such as a knowledge portal, expert directory, community platform, learning management system, funding information and a helpdesk/request-routing mechanism. These tools should complement the common COVE-EXSEE online platform rather than create unnecessary parallel systems.

9.5.5 Recurring Activities

The Italian partner proposes a broad portfolio of recurring activities, including:

- capacity-building workshops;
- mentoring;
- innovation brokerage;
- partner matchmaking;
- technical advisory sessions;
- policy roundtables;
- funding information sessions;
- peer-learning visits;
- an online community of practice; and
- periodic needs review and impact showcase.

9.5.6 Sustainability Approach

The Italian partner identifies several possible complementary mechanisms for continuation beyond project funding:

- public funding;
- membership;
- service contracts;
- national projects;
- EU projects;
- industry sponsorship;
- course-related revenues; and
- partner in-kind contributions.

Italy Support Structure

In a nutshell

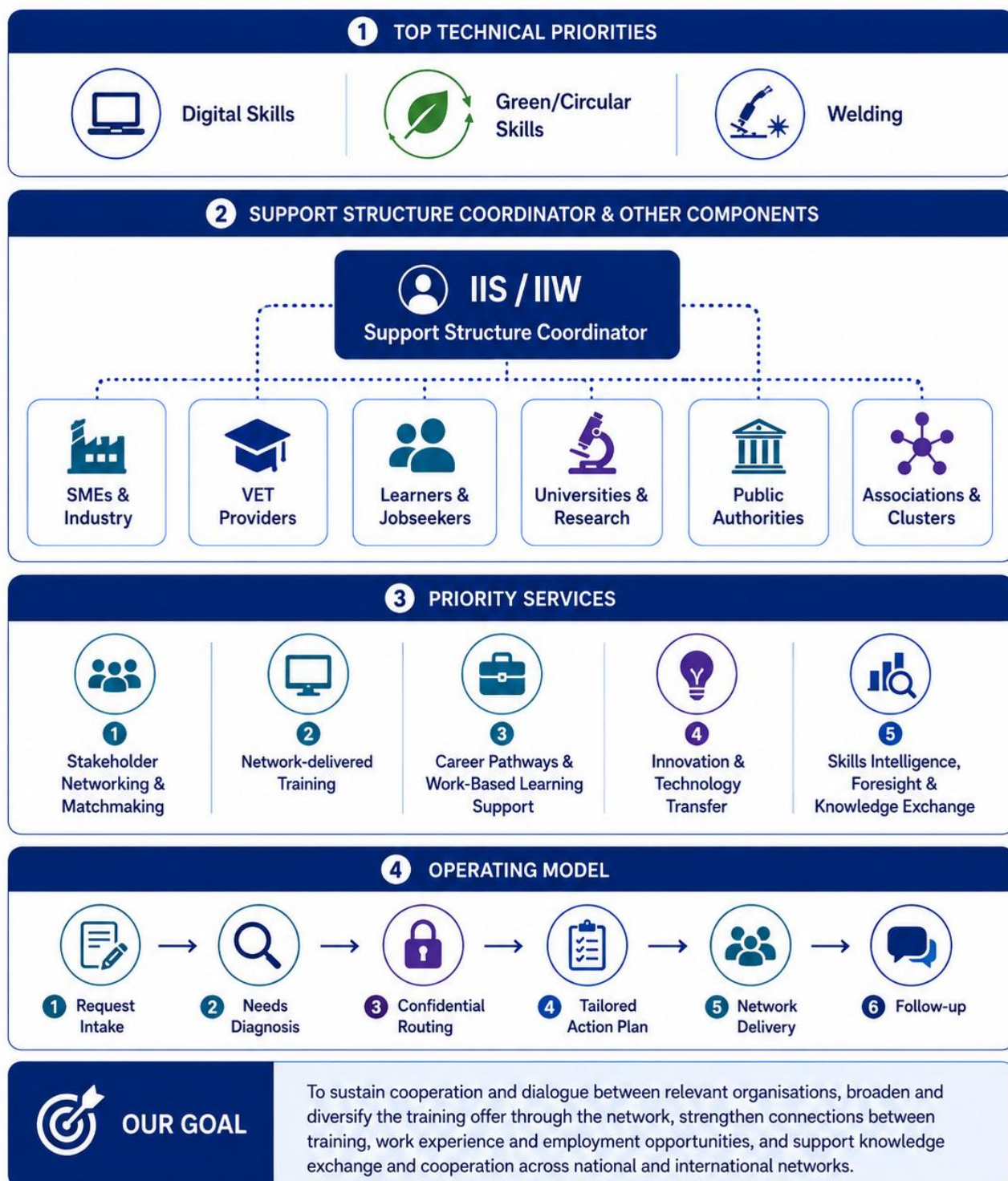


Figure 10: Italy Operational Plan for Support Structure

9.6 Belgium – Transnational Enabling Support Structure

Unlike the territorially anchored Support Structures established in Romania, Greece, Serbia, Türkiye and Italy, the Belgium configuration will operate as a **transnational enabling mechanism supporting the other COVE-EXSEE Regional Support Structures**.

EFW will provide transversal support through its European network, including **Authorised Nominated Bodies (ANBs), Authorised Training Bodies (ATBs), industry contacts and knowledge related to EFW qualifications**. The structure will therefore function as an interface between the regional Support Structures and European-level expertise, qualification pathways, knowledge resources and cooperation opportunities.

9.6.1 Mission

The mission of the EFW-led Transnational Support Structure is:

To strengthen and connect the COVE-EXSEE Regional Support Structures by providing access to European qualification expertise, professional and industry networks, CoVE knowledge resources, cooperation opportunities and cross-regional learning, enabling regional actors to respond more effectively to their own skills and training needs.

Primary Beneficiaries

The **direct beneficiaries** of this structure will be the COVE-EXSEE Regional Support Structures and the organisations coordinating them in:

- Romania;
- Greece;
- Serbia;
- Türkiye;
- Italy and
- South-East European countries

Through these regional structures, the transversal services may indirectly benefit VET providers, SMEs and industrial companies, trainers, learners, research organisations and other actors within the regional skills ecosystems.

The operational principle is therefore:

Transnational Support Structure → Regional Support Structures → Regional Stakeholders

rather than direct delivery of all services from EWF to individual regional users.

9.6.2 Service Portfolio

1. Qualification, Certification and Training Pathway Guidance

The EWF-led structure will support Regional Support Structures in identifying relevant **qualification, certification and training pathways** and in understanding how regional training needs may connect with existing EWF qualification frameworks.

Where appropriate, EWF will facilitate links with relevant **ANBs, ATBs or other competent organisations** and provide information concerning existing qualification and training routes.

For example, a Regional Support Structure seeking to develop or adapt welding-related training may request support in identifying:

- an applicable EWF qualification pathway;
- a relevant ANB or ATB;
- existing training guidelines or qualification resources; or
- possible links between modular training and established qualification systems.

2. European Network and Expert Brokerage

EWF will use its European professional, training and industry networks to help Regional Support Structures identify and connect with relevant:

- technical experts;
- training organisations;
- ANBs and ATBs;
- industry contacts;
- professional networks;
- other CoVEs; and
- organisations possessing relevant expertise or resources.

For example:

Regional need for specialist expertise → EWF network search/matching → Connection with relevant expert or organisation → Regional follow-up

3. European Funding and Cooperation Intelligence

The EWF-led structure will provide Regional Support Structures with information on relevant **European and transnational funding and cooperation opportunities**.

This service may include:

- relevant EU calls and programmes;
- cross-border cooperation opportunities;
- partnership opportunities;
- information on programmes supporting VET, skills, mobility and innovation; and
- signposting towards relevant European networks or project partners.

A clear division should be maintained between the levels of support:

Regional Support Structure: national and regional funding intelligence
EWF Transnational Support Structure: European and cross-border funding and cooperation intelligence

4. Cross-Regional Peer Learning and Cooperation

The structure will connect the Regional Support Structures with one another so that knowledge developed in one region can be shared with others.

The function may include:

- thematic peer-learning sessions;
- cross-regional exchanges;
- expert exchanges;
- sharing of operational practices;
- connections for mobility or cooperation; and
- joint exploration of common challenges.

This gives the transnational structure an important role in preventing the national/regional structures from operating as isolated units.

Two supporting areas can be integrated across the services portfolio.

Trainer and Staff Capacity-Building Brokerage will connect Regional Support Structures with relevant experts, training organisations and existing capacity-building resources where trainer development needs are identified.

European Qualification and Policy Intelligence will provide targeted information on developments relevant to qualifications, skills, vocational training and recognition where these developments affect services delivered by the Regional Support Structures.

9.6.3 Operating Model

Because this structure primarily supports the **Regional Support Structures rather than acting as a local helpdesk for individual SMEs or learners**, its workflow should be adapted accordingly.

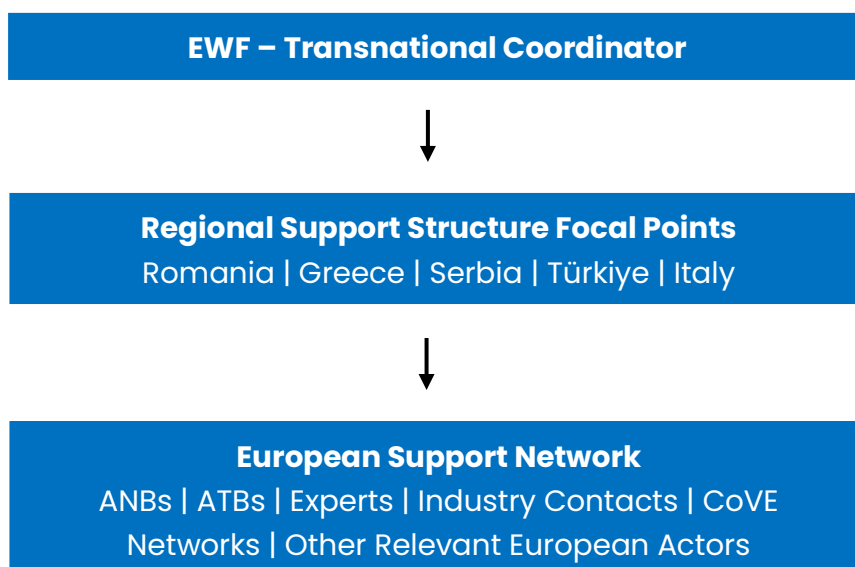
The proposed operating pathway is:

Regional Support Structure Request → EWF Needs Review → Network / Qualification / Resource / Funding Matching → Connection to Relevant European Actor or Resource → Regional Implementation → Feedback and Cross-Regional Knowledge Sharing

A Regional Support Structure will first submit a clearly defined need to EWF. EWF will review the request and determine whether it concerns qualification pathways, expertise, CoVE resources, European funding or another cross-border cooperation need. The request will then be matched with the appropriate network actor, resource or opportunity. The relevant Regional Support Structure remains responsible for local implementation, while EWF facilitates access and connection.

9.6.4 Coordination and Governance

Its core coordination model can be represented as:



Each Regional Support Structure should designate a contact point for transversal requests. EWF will receive, assess and route these requests and facilitate cross-regional exchanges when similar needs occur in more than one region.

Operational Resources

The model relies primarily on **network and knowledge resources**, rather than physical infrastructure.

Its principal resources are expected to include:

- EWF's ANB and ATB network;
- EWF qualification knowledge and related resources;
- industry and professional contacts;
- COVE-EXSEE Regional Support Structure contacts;
- European funding and cooperation information.

9.6.5 Recurring Activities

The EWF-led Support Structure may support implementation through activities such as:

- cross-regional peer-learning sessions;
- qualification and training-pathway information sessions;
- expert and partner matchmaking;
- European funding-information sessions;

Activities should be demand-driven and linked to requests from the Regional Support Structures rather than organised as an independent training programme.

9.6.6 Sustainability Approach

Its continuation should be supported by embedding the transversal functions into **EWF's existing European network and cooperation activities**, maintaining relationships with the Regional Support Structures, and connecting relevant functions with future European projects and partnerships.

Belgium / EWF Transnational Support Structure

Operational Plan in a Nutshell

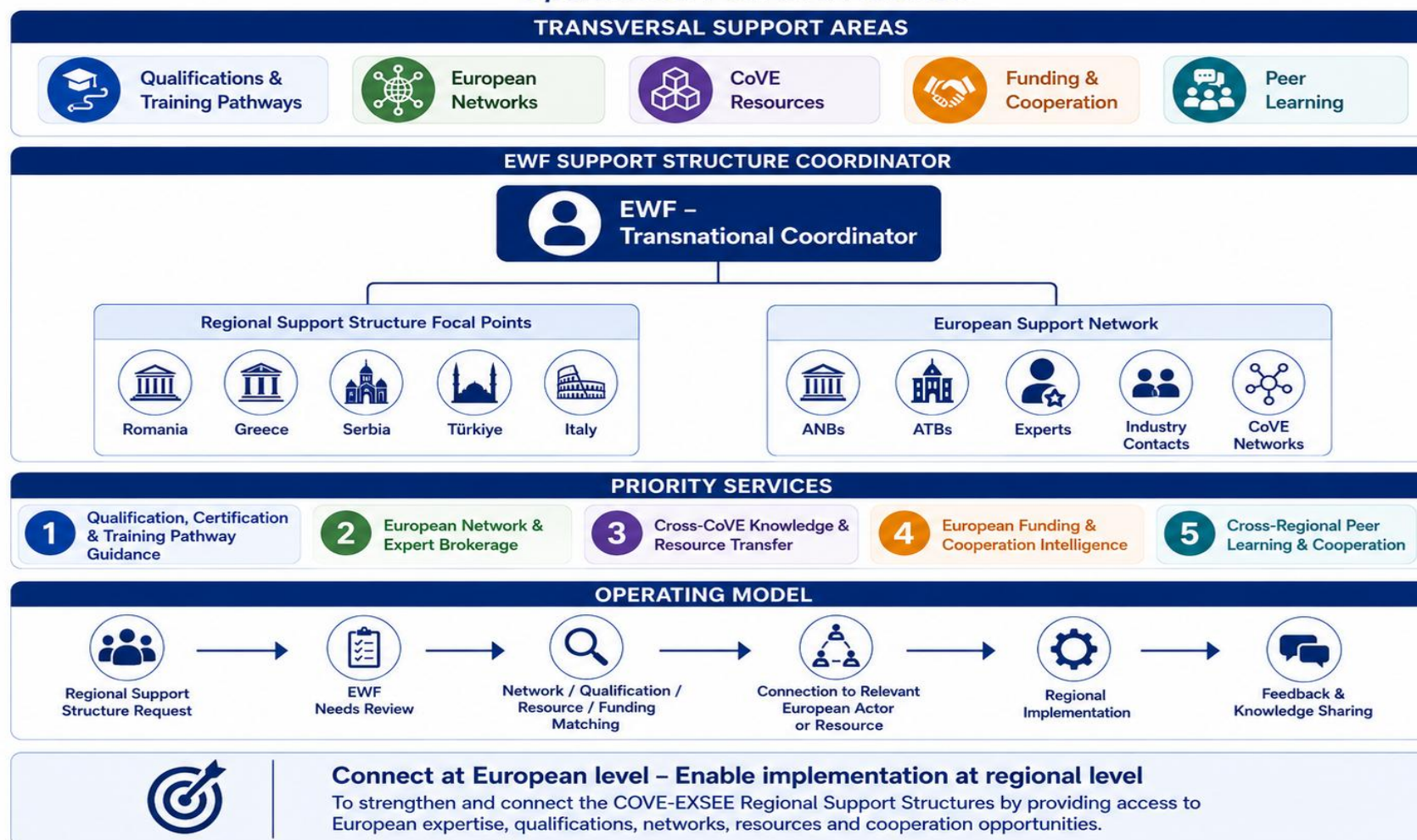


Figure 11: Belgium operational plan for support structure

9.7 Transition to Pilot Implementation

The Country Operational Plans establish the service portfolio, operating model, governance arrangements, resource base and sustainability considerations proposed for each COVE-EXSEE Support Structure. The next phase will move these configurations from planning to implementation through the WP2 pilot activities.

During pilot preparation, partners will confirm the practical arrangements required to make the proposed services accessible, including the relevant coordination points, participating organisations, staff, technical resources, digital tools and referral mechanisms. Where services depend on expertise or infrastructure held by another organisation, the Support Structure will facilitate access through the distributed-service model described in Chapter 7.

During pilot operation, the service portfolios will remain responsive to stakeholder demand. A request may activate training coordination, resource sharing, funding guidance, qualification support, stakeholder brokerage, innovation support, peer learning or another service included in the relevant Country Operational Plan. The number and type of services used will therefore depend on actual regional demand rather than on a predetermined service quota.

Pilot implementation will collect evidence on the **functionality, relevance and use of the Support Structures**, including stakeholder requests, services provided or referred, participating organisations, resources mobilised and user feedback. This evidence will be used to identify which functions operate effectively, where additional resources or partnerships are required, and what adjustments should be made before longer-term implementation.

External policy liaison and iterative refinement

In mid-September 2026, EWF will hold an exchange with Cedefop to present the D2.1 framework and gather relevant policy and practice insights for the implementation and sustainability of the Support Structures. Where relevant, these insights will inform implementation guidance and the ongoing refinement of the regional and transnational configurations. D2.1 should therefore be understood as the common operational baseline rather than a fixed final model: during implementation, its service portfolios, referral mechanisms, partnerships and resource arrangements will be tested, monitored and adjusted in response to stakeholder demand and pilot evidence. This iterative approach contributes to the project's short-term impact framework for Months 1–18: operational capacity-building, fully piloted Support Structures, at least 600 stakeholders completing the interest survey, and at least 10 regional multiplier events.

10. Funding Landscape and Policy Opportunities

The long-term sustainability of regional support structures depends not only on sound governance and stakeholder collaboration but also on access to appropriate funding opportunities. For this reason, COVE-EXSEE conducted a funding landscape mapping exercise to identify European, national and regional funding instruments that could support the establishment, operation and future expansion of the regional support structures.

10.1 Funding Landscape Mapping

The mapping exercise demonstrates that, although funding mechanisms differ across countries, they share several common strategic priorities. Across the analysed regions, investment is increasingly directed towards skills development, digitalisation, green transition, innovation, and regional competitiveness.

Rather than relying on a single funding source, the analysis highlights the importance of combining complementary European, national, and regional instruments. Together, these instruments create a diversified funding landscape capable of supporting different functions of the regional support structures throughout their lifecycle.

The following sections present the main funding opportunities identified through the mapping exercise and discuss their potential contribution to the implementation and sustainability of the COVE-EXSEE Operational Plan.

10.2 Methodology

The funding landscape analysis was conducted through a collaborative mapping exercise involving all COVE-EXSEE partners. Each partner identified European, national, and regional funding opportunities relevant to their respective country and completed a common mapping template to ensure a consistent approach across the consortium. For each funding programme, partners collected information on its objectives, supported activities, target groups, eligible beneficiaries, funding mechanisms, grant amounts (where applicable), implementation challenges, and potential relevance to vocational education, skills development, innovation, and regional cooperation.

To enable cross-country comparison, the collected information was subsequently harmonised and organised into common thematic categories. Rather than comparing individual funding programmes, the analysis focused

on identifying shared funding priorities and strategic opportunities across the participating countries.

This harmonised approach provided the basis for the comparative analysis presented in this chapter and for the development of the **Funding and Policy Opportunities Matrix**, which links identified funding instruments with the key functions of the COVE-EXSEE support structures.

10.3 Comparative Funding Landscape

10.3.1 European Funding Opportunities

European funding programmes represent the most consistent source of support across the partner countries. The mapping identified several instruments that address complementary aspects of vocational excellence and regional development, including the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, **Erasmus+**, **Horizon Europe**, **Digital Europe Programme**, **Interreg**, and, where applicable, the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**.

10.3.2 National and Regional Funding Mechanisms

The mapping of national and regional funding mechanisms illustrates how funding priorities are shaped by the specific economic, industrial and skills-development needs of each partner country. Although common themes such as skills development, innovation, digitalisation and green transition can be identified across the participating regions, the relative emphasis placed on these areas varies considerably.

In **Romania**, the mapped national programmes combine support for research career development with workforce and education measures. Funding opportunities address postdoctoral and early-career research, technology transfer, workplace training and adult education, as well as the modernisation of university education in critical technology fields. Several of the identified programmes also target employability and career transitions, particularly for adults and young people.

In **Greece**, the mapped national and regional opportunities place a comparatively strong emphasis on industrial and regional development. Funding supports research infrastructure, cooperation between enterprises and research organisations, productive investment, digitalisation, decarbonisation and the modernisation of SMEs. Alongside these industrial measures, national

ESF+ instruments provide targeted support for practical training and the professional development of VET and adult-learning educators.

The **Serbian** landscape combines national support for innovation, research and technology transfer with regional programmes promoting cooperation, skills development and mobility. National schemes are particularly oriented towards start-ups, enterprise–research collaboration, technological development and commercialisation, while regional instruments such as Interreg and the Western Balkans Fund provide complementary opportunities for education and training.

In **Türkiye**, the mapped national funding landscape is strongly oriented towards innovation, research and development, technology adoption and infrastructure. KOSGEB and TÜBİTAK programmes provide potential funding pathways for companies, research organisations and higher education institutions, making innovation and technological development particularly visible within the Turkish mapping.

In **Italy**, the mapped funding opportunities are predominantly oriented towards infrastructure-related activities and mobility. The strong presence of infrastructure-focused programmes indicates funding potential for investments, facilities and resources that could contribute to the development or enhancement of regional support structures. Mobility-oriented schemes provide additional opportunities linked to internationalisation, market access and participation in external activities.

The consolidated mapping, in Table 3, can be translated into an operational matrix linking country, Support Structure function, potential financing routes and beneficiaries.

Table 3: Funding and Policy Opportunities Matrix

Support Structure	Functions with Strongest Funding Alignment	Main Mapped Funding Routes	Likely Applicant / Beneficiary
Romania	Training; staff capacity building; curriculum development; R&D and technology transfer	STEP-LLL; STEP-EDU; PED; PTE	Training providers, universities, research organisations, companies
Greece	Trainer upskilling; WBL/mobility; infrastructure; industry–research cooperation	ESF+; Erasmus+; ERDF regional schemes; JTF	VET/public education bodies, research organisations, SMEs, partnerships
Serbia	R&D brokerage; trainer development; mobility; ecosystem cooperation; digital skills	Innovation Fund; Science Fund/EUREKA; Erasmus+; Interreg IPA/Danube; WBF;	SMEs, VET providers, research organisations, regional/public actors

		Horizon Europe; Digital Europe	
Türkiye	R&D/innovation; resource sharing; technology access; expert/partner brokerage	KOSGEB; TÜBİTAK; Horizon Europe	SMEs, universities, research organisations, companies
Italy	Innovation and technology transfer; SME investment/digitalisation; internationalisation	Regional R&D schemes; company investment schemes; SIMEST; Nuova Sabatini; EIC-related opportunities	Primarily companies/SMEs and innovation actors
EWF Transnational Mechanism	Cross-regional cooperation; European funding intelligence; capacity building; mobility; innovation cooperation	Erasmus+; Horizon Europe; Digital Europe; Interreg and other relevant EU programmes	Regional Support Structure partners and transnational consortia

10.3.3 Funding Constraints and Implementation Considerations

The mapping confirms the availability of a broad range of funding opportunities across the partner countries. However, it also reveals several practical limitations that may affect their use for establishing and sustaining regional support structures.

A first challenge concerns **eligibility and access conditions**. Several programmes are restricted to specific types of beneficiaries, geographical areas or partnership configurations. Regional programmes may also be limited to particular territories. As a result, a funding opportunity may be thematically relevant to COVE-EXSEE while not being directly accessible to every organisation involved in a regional support structure.

A second challenge is the **alignment between programme objectives and the functions of the support structures**. Many mapped programmes finance clearly defined activities such as training, research and development, infrastructure, mobility, digitalisation or enterprise investment. However, the mapping did not identify a dedicated funding mechanism specifically designed to finance the continuous coordination and operation of a multi-stakeholder regional support structure.

The mapping also indicates **a variation in the scale of available funding**. Some opportunities provide relatively small grants suitable for targeted activities such as mobility, outreach or limited training interventions, whereas others require large-scale projects or significant minimum investment levels. This creates a

potential mismatch between the financial scale of a funding programme and the specific resource requirements of a regional support structure.

Co-financing requirements constitute another practical consideration. A number of national, regional and European instruments require beneficiaries to contribute part of the project costs. The level of co-financing varies considerably according to the programme, beneficiary type and activity. This may limit accessibility for organisations with limited capacity to provide matching funds, particularly where infrastructure or large-scale innovation investments are involved.

Finally, funding opportunities are subject to different application cycles, deadlines and programme conditions. Some programmes are continuously available or recurrent, while others operate through time-limited calls or are accessible only during particular programming periods. The availability of relevant funding at a given moment therefore cannot be assumed solely because an instrument exists within the broader funding landscape.

These findings suggest that the sustainability of the COVE-EXSEE regional support structures is unlikely to depend on a single funding programme. Instead, each structure will need to identify a combination of funding opportunities suited to its functions, eligible stakeholders, regional context and stage of development. Continuous funding monitoring and cooperation with relevant funding and managing authorities will therefore be important operational functions of the regional support structures.

11. Conclusion

The COVE-EXSEE Operational Plan provides a common framework for translating existing CoVE knowledge, resources and networks into practical support mechanisms for vocational excellence.

The plan responds to the project objective of creating long-lasting support structures that enable systematic collaboration, knowledge sharing and innovation uptake among VET providers, SMEs, research organisations, public authorities and other ecosystem actors. It builds particularly on the experiences and outputs of COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET, while adapting their transferable practices to the different institutional and skills contexts represented within COVE-EXSEE.

The common service model combines training and curriculum support, staff capacity building, knowledge and resource sharing, stakeholder and partnership brokerage, technical and innovation support, qualification and funding guidance, mobility, peer learning and knowledge transfer. Individual

Support Structures do not need to provide every service directly or with equal intensity. Their portfolios are adapted to the needs and capacities identified in their respective ecosystems.

The common stakeholder journey provides a shared operational logic:

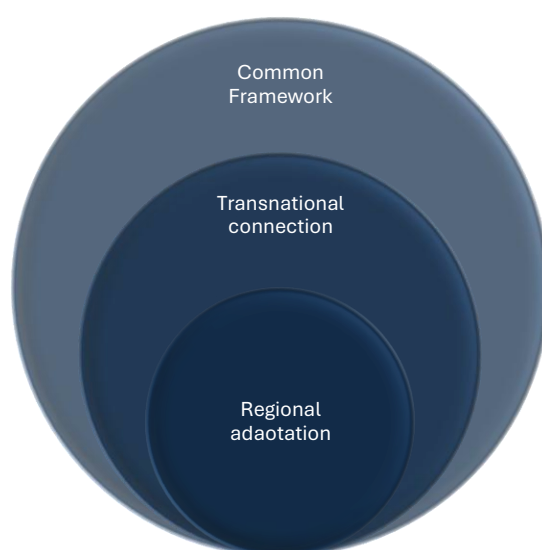
**Access → Needs Assessment → Matching & Referral → Support
Definition → Service Delivery → Follow-up & Feedback**

This ensures that stakeholders can enter through a coordinated route while specialised services remain distributed across the participating ecosystem.

The governance model similarly combines common principles with regional flexibility. Drawing on governance lessons from COVE-WENDT, AILEEN and WELDNET, the model promotes clear role separation, multi-stakeholder participation, distributed coordination, thematic working groups and continuous monitoring. Regional governing arrangements provide strategic direction, while Support Structure Coordinators ensure day-to-day operation and regional partners remain responsible for specialised service delivery.

The Operational Plan translates this common framework into five territorially anchored configurations in Romania, Greece, Serbia, Türkiye and Italy, complemented by a European wide transnational enabling mechanism. The regional structures respond to their own identified skills, resource, collaboration and sustainability needs, while the European wide structure provides transversal access to European qualification expertise, networks, cooperation opportunities and cross-regional learning.

This approach allows COVE-EXSEE to combine:



rather than imposing one organisational model across different national contexts.

The plan also recognises that long-term operation cannot depend exclusively on new infrastructure or continued Erasmus+ funding. Existing training centres, laboratories, experts, digital platforms and partner networks should be mobilised wherever possible, while potential continuation mechanisms can combine national and European projects, public support, service contracts, membership, industry contributions and other context-appropriate sources. The specific financial combinations remain to be validated through implementation and the sustainability activities undertaken under WP4. The proposal itself foresees regional and consortium-wide sustainability strategies addressing ownership, resources, policy links and initial funding routes.

Importantly, D2.1 represents the design and planning stage, not the final validation of the Support Structures. The configurations presented in this report will be tested during WP2 pilot implementation. The pilot will allow real-user testing, collection of usage data and stakeholder feedback, operational monitoring and subsequent refinement of the models.

The next phase should therefore move from:

Evidence → Operational Plan → Pilot Implementation → User Feedback → Refinement → Sustainable Support Structures

Through this iterative process, COVE-EXSEE will test whether the proposed structures can effectively connect regional needs with existing training, expertise, resources and cooperation opportunities, while generating the evidence required for their further development, sustainability and possible replication.

In this sense, D2.1 establishes the operational foundation for the next stages of WP2: it identifies what the Support Structures are intended to do, how stakeholders should access them, how they should be governed and coordinated, which resources can be mobilised, and how the common model should be adapted to each participating ecosystem.

Annex 1– Funding Mapping

ISIM

The following table details mapped funding programs, target groups, eligibility criteria, budget parameters, and key strategic challenges identified for ISIM:

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Proiecte de Cercetare Exploratorie – PCE 2026 / Exploratory Research Projects 2026 (UEFISCDI, PNCDI IV, Programul 5.1-IDEI) Link: https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/proiecte-de-cercetare-exploratorie-pce	National (Romania)	Fundamental/exploratory scientific research, 13 scientific domains	Targets: Individual researchers via host institution Applicants: Project director: PhD holder, internationally recognised expertise, physically based at Romanian host institution; one	Value: Max 1,200,000 Lei (RON)/project (max. 36 months); total competition budget 80,000,000 Lei (RON) Co-funding: None specified beyond state funding; indirect costs capped at 20% of direct costs	Launched. Platform open from 23 June 2026. Deadline: 31 July 2026, 16:00	Doctoral degree + demonstrated international research track record	Pure/exploratory research focus – limited direct fit for "support structure" design work; strict one-proposal-per-director rule

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			submission per PCE/TE/PD cycle				
Proiecte de cercetare pentru stimularea tinerelor echipe independente – TE 2026 / Research Projects to Stimulate Young Independent Teams 2026 (UEFISCDI, PNCDI IV) Link: https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/proiecte-de-cercetare-pentru-stimularea-tinerelor-echipe-independente-te	National (Romani a)	Building independent early-career research teams	Targets: Young researchers (PhD ≤12 years) + min. 3-person team incl. 1 PhD student Applicants: Director: first PhD obtained ≤12 years before submission; full-time employed at host institution; one submission per PCE/TE/PD cycle	Value: Max 600,000 Lei (RON)/project (18–24 months) Total competition budget 2.000.000 Lei (RON) Co-funding: Not specified	Launched. Platform open from 23 June 2026. Deadline: 30 July 2026, 16:00	Early-career doctoral researcher status	Small team-size and budget; narrow fit for VET/support-structure objectives

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Proiecte de cercetare postdoctorală – PD 2026 / Postdoctoral Research Projects 2026 (UEFISCDI, PNCDI IV, Programul 5.2 Resurse Umane)	National (Romania)	Continuing post-PhD research careers	Targets: Postdoctoral researchers + mentor Applicants: Recent PhD holder; mentor may support up to 3 proposals; one submission per PCE/TE/PD cycle	Value: Total competition budget max. 35,000,000 Lei (RON); Project maximum budget 300.000 Lei (RON)/project, for a maximum 24 months Co-funding: Not specified; indirect costs capped at 20% (excl. equipment)	Launched. Platform open from 30 June 2026. Deadline: 28 July 2026, 16:00	Recent doctorate + mentor arrangement	Postdoc-specific
Proiect Experimental Demonstrativ – PED 2026 / Experimental Demonstrative Project 2026 (UEFISCDI, PNCDI IV)	National (Romania)	Developing/testing experimental demonstrators (TRL 2–3 → TRL 3–4) for new/improved products, technologies, methods, systems or services	Targets: Research organisations partnered with R&D-active enterprises Applicants: Public/private research	Value: Max 750,000 Lei (RON)/project (12–24 months); competition budget 67,220,000 Lei (RON) Co-funding: Company partner must	Launched. Deadline: 15 September 2026, 16:00; platform opened 6 July 2026	Applied R&D results already at TRL 2–3	Requires an industry partner from the outset; demonstrator-stage funding only, not infrastructure/governance

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			organisations, in partnership with companies	co-finance per state-aid rules (exact rate not specified)			
Proiect de Transfer la Operatorul Economic – PTE 2026 / Technology Transfer Project to the Economic Operator 2026 (UEFISCDI, PNCDI IV, subprogramul Parteneriate pentru competitivitate) Link: https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/proiect-de-transfer-la-operatorul-economic	National (Romania)	Transferring research results/technology to a named company for commercial uptake (industrial research, experimental development, innovation activities)	Targets: Research centres/institutes partnered with an economic operator (≥2 years active, positive financials) Applicants: Research organisation + partnered enterprise (public or private) active in Romania	Value: Max 1,500,000 Lei (RON)/project; competition budget 67,220,000 Lei (RON) Co-funding: Company partner co-financing required per state-aid scheme; ≥30% of requested state budget must go to experimental development	Launched. Deadline: 16 September 2026, 16:00; platform opened 6 July 2026	Existing, transfer-ready research result; established company partner	Requires an identified receiving company with 2+ years of positive financial results; one proposal per director
STEP-LLL – Competențe pentru viitor: formare la locul de muncă	National (ESF+)	Workplace training & adult education in	Targets: Accredited	Value: Budget: €92,000,000	Launched – final Guide	Accreditation as training/employm	Very close fit to COVE-EXSEE's training

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
și educația adulților în tehnologiile critice – Adulți / STEP-LLL – Skills for the Future: Workplace Training and Adult Education in Critical Technologies – Adults (PEO, Priority II, STEP initiative)	(Romania)	STEP critical technologies (digital, deep-tech, biotech); career guidance for jobseekers into STEP sectors	public/private employment-service and training providers, sectoral confederations, professional associations	(100% ESF+ funded) Co-funding: 0% co-financing (explicit exception to normal PEO minimum co-financing rule)	published, no longer in consultation; MySMIS2021 opens 29.05.2026 16:00 MySMIS2021 closes 28.08.2026 16:00	ent-service provider	mission; worth confirming exact MySMIS opening/closing dates directly with AM POEO (Managing Authority for the Education and Employment Programme)
Link: https://mfe.gov.ro/ghiduri_peos/step-III-competente-pentru-viitor-formare-la-locul-de-munca-si-educatia-adultilor-in-tehnologiile-critice-adulti/			Applicants: Accredited employment-service/training providers; trade/employer confederations; sectoral non-profit associations; research/training institutes				
STEP-EDU: dezvoltarea și modernizarea ofertelor educaționale universitare în domeniile tehnologice critice – Adulți / STEP-EDU: Developing and	National (ESF+, 100% EU-funded)	Modernising/adapting university curricula (bachelor's/master's) in STEP fields	Targets: Unemployed and employed persons over	Value: Call budget: €120,000,000; project value: min. €6,500,000	Still in public consultation (published 20.03.2026); opening/clos	Universities need relevant partners with documented experience delivering STEP-	Very large project minimums (€6.5M floor) mean this suits a large university consortium, not a

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Modernising University Educational Offers in Critical Technology Fields – Adults (PEO, Priority 11, Action 11.g.1, ESO4.7) Link: https://mfe.gov.ro/ghiduri_peos/ghidul-solicitantului-step-edu-dezvoltarea-si-modernizarea-ofertelor-educationale-universitare-in-domeniile-tehnologice-critice-adulti/	(Romania)	(digital, deep-tech, clean/resource-efficient tech, biotech); training university teaching staff; student-facing applied labs/modules; optional university business incubators for student prototyping (up to €100,000/student in milestone-based grants)	29 years old Applicants: Sole eligible applicants: public and private universities. Eligible partners: universities, authorised public/private continuing-training (FPC) providers, training/research institutes	– max. €20,000,000 (benchmark: €13,038/participant) Co-funding: 0% – 100% EU-funded, no co-financing required	ing dates in MySMIS2021 are blank placeholders – not yet formally launched	domain training/curricula to qualify as partners	single small project; base activities (curriculum + student labs) mandatory; incubator component optional
STEP-EDU: dezvoltarea și modernizarea ofertelor educaționale universitare în domeniile tehnologice critice – Tineri / STEP-EDU: Developing and Modernising University Educational Offers in Critical Technology Fields – Youth (PEO, Priority 12, Action 12.a.1, ESO4.1)	National (ESF+, 100% EU-funded) (Romania)	Same core activities as the Adults call (curriculum modernisation, student labs, optional business incubators), but framed around youth employability and STEM career	Targets: Youth aged 15 up to (not including) 29 Applicants: Sole eligible applicants: public and private	Value: Call budget: €54,045,849; project value: min. €6,500,000 – max. €20,000,000 (same per-participant benchmark)	Still in public consultation (published 20.03.2026); dates blank – not yet formally launched	Same as above	Smaller total budget (€54M vs €120M) than the Adults call means fewer projects can be funded even though the same €6.5M project floor applies

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Link: https://mfe.gov.ro/ghiduri_peos/ ghidul-solicitantului-step-edu- dezvoltarea-si-modernizarea- ofertelor-educationale- universitare-in-domeniile- tehnologice-critice-tineri/		transitions, with explicit attention to disadvantaged youth and gender gaps	universities. Eligible partners: universities, authorised FPC providers, training/research institutes	Co-funding: 0% – 100% EU-funded			

CERTH

The following table details mapped funding programs, target groups, eligibility criteria, budget parameters, and key strategic challenges identified for CERTH:

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
ERDF – Strengthening Research Infrastructures in Priority Sectors of the South Aegean Region Link: https://pepna.gr/el/calls/enishysi-ereynitikon-ypodomon-se-tomeis-proteraiotitas-tis-perifereias?utm	Regional (Greece)	Research equipment, laboratories, software, demonstrators and applied research infrastructures.	Targets: Researchers, enterprises, regional innovation actors and, indirectly, VET learners and trainers. Applicants: public research bodies and research and knowledge-dissemination organisations active in	Value: 1.000.000 total call budget Co-funding: No general private contribution is stated.	Open	No	The projects must establish or upgrade an eligible research infrastructure located and operating in the South Aegean.

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			the South Aegean.				
ERDF/RIS3 Partnerships between Enterprises of the Ionian Islands Region and Research and Knowledge-Dissemination Organisations – ION67	Regional (Greece)	Industrial research, experimental development, innovative products and services, process optimisation and enterprise-research cooperation. Development of training technologies, industrial demonstrators , digital learning tools and sectoral innovation solutions.	Targets: SMEs, research organisations, industrial personnel and regional innovation ecosystems. Applicants: Partnerships involving existing enterprises with an establishment in the Ionian Islands and research centres,	Value: €4,000,000 total, €50,000–€400,000 per project. Co-funding: Yes, for participating enterprises. The rate depends on the state-aid category, enterprise size and type of research activity. The	Open	No	A stand-alone VET activity is not sufficient. Training tools or learning facilities must result from a genuine research and innovation project with an eligible regional enterprise

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			institutes or university laboratories.	enterprise share must represent at least 40% of the total eligible project budget.			
Just Transition Fund – Western Macedonia and Megalopoli – Empowerment Opportunity for Existing SMEs Link: https://efepae.gr/drasi/%CE%B5%CF%85%CE%BA%CE%B1%CE%B9%CF%81%CE%AF%CE%B1-%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%B4%CF%85%CE%BD%CE%AC%CE%BC%CF%89%CF%83%CE%B7%CF%82-%CE%85%CF%86%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%AC%CE%BC%CE%B5%CE%BD%CF%89%CE%BD-%CE%BC%CE%BC/?utm	Regional (Greece)	Technology and equipment acquisition, digitalisation, energy upgrading, service modernisation and SME competitiveness.	Targets: micro and small enterprises Applicants: Existing micro and small enterprises in Western Macedonia and the municipalities of	Value: €20,000,000 total, €2,000–€20,000 per investment. Co-funding: Yes. Grant: 75%; private contribution: 25%	Open	No	Very small project ceiling and an imminent deadline. Appropriate for individual employer partners.

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			Megalopolis, Oichalia, Gortynia and Tripoli.				
Just Transition Fund – Western Macedonia and Megalopoli – Empowerment Opportunity for Existing SMEs – DAM21, Investment Plans of new and under Establishment SMEs. Link: https://efepae.gr/drasi/%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%AF%CF%83%CF%87%CF%85%CF%83%CE%B7-%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%B4%CF%85%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8E%CE%BD-%CF%83%CF%87%CE%B5%CE%B4%CE%AF%CF%89%CE%BD-%CE%BD%CE%AD%CF%89%CE%BD-%CE%BA%CE%B1-3/	Regional (GREECE)	New productive investments, equipment, digital and green technologies, new services and employment creation. Training, Infrastructure Digital	Targets: Start-ups, SMEs Applicants: New and under-establishment SMEs (or Micro) in eligible Just Transition areas.	Value: €40,000,000 total call budget Co-funding: Yes. Grant: 70% for micro and small enterprise s and 60% for medium-sized enterprise s.	Open	No	Only Companies can apply
Western Macedonia and Megalopolis, Just Transition Fund – DAM22 – Investment Plans of	Regional (GREECE)	Productive modernisation, decarbonisation, equipment,	Targets: Existing SMEs, workers and	Value: €40,000,000 total, €300,000	Open	No	Training infrastructure must support the enterprise's

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Existing SMEs in Mainland Just Transition Areas Link: https://efepae.gr/drasi/%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%AF%CF%83%CF%87%CF%85%CF%83%CE%B7-%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%B4%CF%85%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8E%CE%BD-%CF%83%CF%87%CE%B5%CE%B4%CE%AF%CF%89%CE%BD-%CF%85%CF%86%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%AC-3/?utm		digital transformation and new services. Infrastructure, Training, Digital	local supply chains Applicants: Existing micro, small and medium-sized enterprises.	– €12,000,000 per project Co-funding: Yes. Grant: 70% for micro and small enterprises and 60% for medium-sized enterprises.			productive investment – rather than operate as an independent education project
Western Macedonia and Megalopolis, Just Transition Fund – DAM23 – Productive Investments by Existing Large Enterprises in Mainland Just Transition Areas Link: https://efepae.gr/drasi/%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%AF%CF%83%CF%87%CF%85%CF%83%CE%B7-%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%B4%CF%85%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8E%CE%BD-%CF%83%CF%87%CF%85%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8E%CE%BD-%CF%83%CF%87%CE%B5%CE%B4%CE%AF%CF%89%CE%BD-%CF%85%CF%86%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%AC-3/?utm	Regional (GREECE)	Major industrial transformation, decarbonisation, productive diversification and new	Targets: Existing large enterprises, industrial employees Applicants: Existing	Value: €30,000,000 total, €5–40 million per project. Co-funding: Yes	Open	No	The minimum investment is €5 million and the educational component cannot be the primary

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
CF%87%CE%B5%CE%B4%CE%AF%CF%89%CE%BD-%CF%80%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%B1%CE%B3%CF%89-5/?utm		employment - Infrastructure, Training, Digital	large enterprises with at least one complete closed financial year and an eligible investment in the Just Transition territories				investment objective
National – Greece, ESF+ Human Resources and Social Cohesion Programme ESF+ Practical Training in Higher Education – Academic Years 2024–2025, 2025–2026 and 2026–2027 – Link: <u>https://espa-anthropinodynamiko.gr/invitation/ekp38-praktiki-askisi-tritovathmias-ekpaidefsis-ak-eton-2024-2025-2025-2026-kai-2026-2027/?utm</u>	National (GREECE)	Training – Remunerated practical training for first-cycle university students; accident insurance; publication of placements through the ATLAS system; connections	Targets: Undergraduate students enrolled in Greek universities whose study programme includes mandatory or optional practical training.	Value: €60 million total programme budget. Co-funding: No private co-financing is indicated	Open	No	Access depends on a student's university and department.

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
		between universities and employers.	Applicants: Students apply through calls issued by their department or university. Employers can register placements in ATLAS but do not submit funding proposals under the central call.	for students. The internship s are financed through the approved university operations.			
Erasmus+ KA1 – Mobility of VET Learners and Staff, KA121-VET / KA122-VET Link: https://www.iky.gr/en/erasmus/follow-up-announcement-of-the-national-agency/ https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-1/mobility-vet	EU (GREECE)	Training – Mobility – Learner and apprentice mobility, staff training, job shadowing, teaching	Targets: Initial and continuing VET learners, recent VET graduates, VET teachers, trainers and	Value: No single project ceiling. Co-funding: No fixed co-funding	Closed	No	Closed for 2026 VET funding proposals in Greece. The Greek National Agency applied the 19 February 2026 deadline and did not

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
		assignments, skills competitions, long-term ErasmusPro mobility; preparatory visits, work-based learning abroad	staff. Applicants: VET providers, local and regional authorities with a VET role, companies and organisations hosting or training VET learners accredited mobility-consortium coordinators.	rate, although beneficiaries may need to supplement unit contributions with their own resources.			announce a second VET round. Only Adult Education has a second KA122 round in Greece in October 2026.
Erasmus Accreditation in VET – KA120-VET Link: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-1/erasmus-accre	EU (GREECE)	Training, Mobility – Development of a long-term Erasmus Plan;	Targets: VET providers, learners Applicants:	Value: No immediate grant. Accreditation	Open	No	Accreditation does not itself award a grant. The applicant must present a

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
ditation-vet-schools-adult-education?utm		internationalisation of VET; learner and staff mobility strategy; establishment of a national mobility consortium.	VET providers; local or regional authorities and coordination bodies with a VET role; companies and organisations working with VET learners and apprentices.	provides access to future annual KA121 funding applications. Co-funding: Not applicable at the accreditation stage. Future mobility grants follow Erasmus+ unit-cost rules.			credible multiannual Erasmus Plan and comply with the Erasmus quality standards
Erasmus+ KA210-VET – Small-scale Partnerships in Vocational Education and Training	EU (GREECE)	Training – Development and testing of small-scale VET initiatives;	Targets: VET learners, apprentices, trainers, teachers,	Value: Two predefined lump-sum	Open	No	The same organisation may participate in no more than

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Link: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/small-scale-partnerships?utm		exchange of good practices; development of training materials and innovative teaching approaches; digital and green skills; inclusion; cooperation between VET providers and enterprises; local and regional skills initiatives; transnational learning, teaching and training activities.	in-company trainers, SMEs, local and regional VET stakeholder s. Applicants: Any public or private organisation established in an EU Member State or Erasmus+-associated country. A minimum of two organisations from two different eligible countries is	options: €30,000 or €60,000 per project. Co-funding: No formal co-financing percentage is specified.			five KA210 applications overall per deadline, either as applicant or partner. A second application round is not automatic and depends on the National Agency.

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			required. The applicant submits on behalf of the partnership to its National Agency, for a Greek applicant, this is IKY.				
National – Greece; ESF+, under the Programme “Human Resources and Social Cohesion 2021–2027”, Priority 3: Education and Lifelong Learning. The call falls under Specific Objective ESO4.7 concerning lifelong learning and career transitions. Link: https://espa-anthropodynamiko.gr/invitation/ekpaidefsi-kai-epimorfosi-ekpaidefton-enilikon-epangelmatikis-ekpaidefsis-katartisis-kai-dia-viou-mathisis-d-v-m/?utm	National (GREECE)	Training – Education and Professional Development of Adult Educators in Vocational Education and Training and Lifelong Learning	Targets: Adult educators; VET teachers and trainers; trainers of trainers; assessors; staff responsible for the design and	Value: 11040000 Co-funding: No private co-financing is indicated for the designated public beneficiaries.	Open	No	The call is restricted to two specifically identified national bodies and therefore does not provide a direct application route for VET centres or CoVE partnerships.Ac

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			<p>implementation of lifelong-learning programmes;</p> <p>Applicants: Public Organisations</p>				<p>access for external VET providers may only arise later through procurement, implementation contracts, consultations or pilot activities.</p>

EWF

The following table details mapped funding programs, target groups, eligibility criteria, budget parameters, and key strategic challenges identified for EWF:

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Erasmus+ –Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) Link: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/centres-of-vocational-excellence	EU (Europe)	CoVE development; VET excellence ecosystems; education–industry cooperation; capacity building; green/digital skills; joint training resource	Targets: VET providers, companies, research organisations, public authorities, learners Applicants: Transnational consortia of eligible organisations	Value: Call specific Co-funding: call-specific	Active programme; calls published under Erasmus +	EWF/consortium has direct CoVE experience	Large consortium and highly competitive; designed for substantial ecosystem-level cooperation
Erasmus+ – Alliances for InnovationEU Link: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/alliances-for-innovation	EU (Europe)	VET–HE–business cooperation; sectoral skills strategies; curricula; emerging skills; innovation in education and training	Targets: VET, HE, enterprises, sectoral organisations, learners/workforce Applicants: Eligible	Value: Call specific Co-funding: call-specific	Active programme	EWF has experience on the AFI projects	Large consortium; strong sectoral and innovation dimension required

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			transnational consortia				
Erasmus+ – Forward-Looking Projects Link: https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/online-info-session-forward-looking-projects-school-education-vocational-education-and-training-2025-03-11_en	EU (Europe)	Innovative VET approaches; policy experimentation; transferability; mainstreaming and scaling educational innovation	Targets: Education/training organisations, public authorities, social partners and other relevant actors Applicants: Call/topic-specific transnational consortia-	Value: Call specific Co-funding; call-specific	Subject to annual Erasmus+ programming	Direct experience – COVE-EXSEE is funded under this action	Availability and priorities depend on annual work programmes/calls
Erasmus+ – Capacity Building in VET Link: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/organisations/cooperation-among-organisations-and-institutions/capacity-building-vet	EU (Europe)	VET capacity building; curriculum development; trainer development; labour-market responsiveness; international transfer	Targets: VET organisations and stakeholders in eligible partner regions Applicants: Partnerships involving eligible	Value: Call-specific Co-funding; Call-specific	Active subject to regional calls	Potential relevance for future geographic expansion	Not suitable as a general continuation fund for existing support structures; geographic eligibility restrictions

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			third countries not associated to Erasmus+				
Horizon Europe – Cluster 4: Digital, Industry and Space Link: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/cluster-4-digital-industry-and-space_en	EU (Europe)	Advanced manufacturing; AI; robotics; digital twins; advanced materials; industrial digitalisation; circular industry; demonstration	Targets: Industry, SMEs, universities, RTOs, technology organisations Applicants: Eligible Horizon Europe consortia according to topic	Value: Topic-specific Co-funding: Depends on action type	Active programme	Relevant to EWF's advanced manufacturing ecosystem	Strong R&I component required; not suitable for standalone VET delivery
Horizon Europe – European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE) Link: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/european-innovation-ecosystems_en	EU (Europe)	Innovation ecosystems; regional cooperation; innovation uptake; scaling; SME-research-education cooperation	Targets: Innovation agencies, clusters, SMEs, research/education actors, public authorities Applicants: Topic-specific transnational consortia	Value: Topic-specific Co-funding: Topic-specific	Active programme	Relevant to CoVE ecosystem approach	Calls require strong innovation ecosystem rationale

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) – Strand 1 Link: https://eisma.ec.europa.eu/programmes/interregional-innovation-investments-i3-instrument_en	EU (Europe)	Interregional innovation investments; advanced manufacturing; demonstration; SME uptake; scaling; S3 value chains	Targets: Regional innovation ecosystems, SMEs, research/education organisations, public authorities Applicants: Interregional consortia linked to Smart Specialisation priorities	Value: Call-specific Co-funding: Call-specific	Active instrument	N/A	Requires mature investment projects and strong interregional/S3 alignment
Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) – Strand 2a Link: https://eisma.ec.europa.eu/programmes/interregional-innovation-investments-i3-instrument_en	EU (Europe)	Integration of less-developed regions into EU value chains; innovation deployment; smart economic transformation	Targets: Regional ecosystems, SMEs, innovation intermediaries, research/education actors Applicants: Eligible	Value: Call-specific Co-funding: Call-specific	Active instrument	N/A	Territorial and S3-related requirements apply

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
interregional partnerships							
Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) – Strand 2b Capacity Building Link: https://eisma.ec.europa.eu/funding-opportunities/calls-proposals/i3-capacity-building-call-2026-i3-2026-cap2b_en	EU (Europe)	Regional innovation ecosystem capacity; investment pipeline development; cluster/intermediary capacity	Targets: Public authorities, clusters, innovation intermediaries and ecosystem actors Applicants: Call-specific	Value: Call-specific Co-funding: Call-specific	Periodic calls	Very strong conceptual fit with COVE-EXSEE support structures	Focused on capacity building for interregional investment; calls are time-bound
ESF+ – Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) Strand Link: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/funding/european-social-fund-plus-esf_en	EU (Europe)	Skills; employment; workforce transition; social innovation; inclusion; innovative training/employment models	Targets: Workers, learners, vulnerable groups, employment and training organisations Applicants: Call-specific	Value: Call-specific Co-funding: Call-specific	Active programme	Potential relevance	Much narrower than mainstream ESF+; highly call-specific
Interreg Danube Region Link: https://interreg-danube.eu/projects	Austria, 2 German regions (Baden-	competitiveness and sustainable development of the programme's	Applicants: Local, regional, national public bodies/ bodies	Value: EUR 266 million	Upcoming	N/A	Limited area

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
	Württemberg and Bayern), Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria and 5 non-EU countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine. (Europe)	area through innovation, green transition, social inclusion and better regional governance	governed by public law (including EGTCs in the meaning of Article 2(16) of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013)	Co-funding: N/A			
			International organisations				
			Private bodies				

HELIXCONNECT

The following table details mapped funding programs, target groups, eligibility criteria, budget parameters, and key strategic challenges identified for HELIXCONNECT:

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Innovation Fund of the Republic of Serbia – Smart Start Link: https://www.inovacionifond.rs/en/programs/smart-start	National (Serbia)	Early-stage product/service development, market validation, business model design – aligned with Serbia's Smart Specialisation Strategy (incl. ICT/AI, Future Production)	Targets: SMEs, Student, Trainers/Teachers (as founders of spin-offs) Applicants: Pre-seed start-ups; teams where ≥51% of members are residents of Serbia	Value: Up to ~RSD 7.4M (~€63,000) + RSD 600,000 mentorship voucher Co-funding: Min. 10% in cash from private sources	Open (annual call, documentation released Aug 2025)	No	Targeted at very early-stage start-ups – useful as a spin-out vehicle from CoVE training rather than for the CoVE itself; small ticket size
Innovation Fund of the Republic of Serbia – Collaborative Grant Scheme (Tehnobnova / R&D between Industry and Science) Link: https://www.inovacionifond.rs/en/programs	National (Serbia)	Research and development, Digital transformation, Industry-academia collaboration, applied research	Targets: SMEs, Industry, VET centers, Schools (as research users) Applicants: Consortia of companies with public R&D	Value: Up to ~€500,000 per project Co-funding: Co-financing depending on company size	Recurrent calls (linked to World Bank SAIGE programme and Reform & Growth Facility)	No	Requires a registered R&D organisation as partner; reporting and procurement rules aligned with World Bank requirements

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			organisations (universities, institutes)	(typically 30–60%)			
Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia – Green Programme of Cooperation between Science and Industry (Phase II) Link: https://fondzanauku.gov.rs/?lang=en	National (Serbia)	Research and development, Green energy transition, commercialisation of research results, science–industry partnerships	Targets: SMEs, Industry, VET centers Applicants: Consortia of accredited research organisations and Serbian companies (Phase II open only to Phase I beneficiaries)	Value: Up to ~€300,000 per project Co-funding: Industry partner co-financing (typically ~20–30%)	Restricted (Phase II open only to Phase I awardees, but new Phase I rounds expected)	No	Phase-gated access; sector focus on green/clean tech may not directly cover all welding/joining activities
Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation – EUREKA / Eurostars (Serbian window) Link: https://nitra.gov.rs/en/nauka/finansiranje-nauke	National (Serbia)	Research and development, Digital transformation, transnational industrial R&D	Targets: SMEs, Industry, VET centers, Trainers/Teachers Applicants: Serbian companies and research	Value: National contribution up to ~€300,000 per Serbian partner per project Co-funding: Min. 50%	Open (annual calls, typically Q1–Q2)	No	Requires building an international consortium under EUREKA labels; national funding decisions made independently per country, which can complicate timelines

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			organisations participating in EUREKA networks projects with at least one partner from another EUREKA member country	co-financing for company applicants			
Interreg IPA ADRION 2021–2027 (Adriatic-Ionian Programme) Link: https://www.interreg-ipa-adrion.eu/	Regional (Serbia)	Research and development, Education and Training (skills for smart specialisation), Digital transformation, Innovation	Targets: VET centers, SMEs, Industry, Trainers/Teachers Applicants: Public bodies, NGOs, education and training providers, innovation agencies, SMEs from 10 partner states (incl. Serbia)	Value: Max EU contribution €1,200,000 per project (85% co-financing rate) Co-funding: 15% co-financing required from each partner	2nd Call closed June 2025 – evaluation ongoing; 3rd Call expected late 2026	Yes	Requires consortium of ≥4 partners from 4 different countries in the macro-region; competitive (success rate ~10–15%); 36-month implementation cap

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027 Link: https://interreg-danube.eu/	Regional (Serbia)	Research and development, Education and Training, Digital transformation, Social inclusion, Innovation – Priority 1 (Smarter Danube) most relevant	Targets: VET centers, SMEs, Industry, Trainers/Teachers, Schools, Student Applicants: Public bodies, NGOs, universities, VET providers, SMEs from 14 Danube Region countries (incl. Serbia)	Value: Typical project size €1.5M–€3M EU contribution (80% co-financing rate for IPA partners) Co-funding: 20% co-financing for IPA partners (incl. Serbia)	3rd Call deadline 15 December 2025; 4th Call expected 2026/2027	Yes	Geography larger and more competitive than ADRION; transnational consortium of 7+ partners typically required; long preparation and evaluation cycles
Western Balkans Fund (WBF) – Grants for Grassroots Initiatives (8th Call) and MOVE Grants Link: https://westernbalkansfund.org/	Regional (Serbia)	Education and Training, Mobility, Social inclusion, regional cooperation	Targets: VET centers, Trainers/Teachers, Student, NGOs, schools Applicants: Civil society organisations, education and training	Value: Up to €15,000 per regional grant (Grants for Grassroots Initiatives); MOVE Grants smaller scale	Open (8th Call open until 20 April 2026)	No	Small ticket size – good for outreach, dissemination, soft-skills activities, but not for infrastructure or substantial training; requires partners from at least 2 other WB economies

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			providers, public institutions in the 6 Western Balkans economies	Co-funding: No formal co-financing required			
Erasmus+ Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) – ERASMUS-EDU-2026-PEX-COVE Link: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-2/key-action-2/centres-vocational-excellence	EU (Serbia)	Education and Training, Research and development, Mobility, Digital transformation, Green energy transition, Social inclusion	Targets: VET centers, Schools, SMEs, Industry, Trainers/Teachers, Student Applicants: Consortia of ≥8 organisations from ≥4 EU MS or Programme-associated countries; VET providers, companies, public authorities, HEIs, research institutes	Value: Up to €4M per project (lump sum) Co-funding: Lump-sum grant – no separate co-financing rate, but partner own contribution typical	Open (Call published Nov 2025; deadline 3 September 2026)	Yes	Highly competitive (success rate ~15–20%); already core programme for PI-FORWARD – sustainability requires diversification beyond CoVE; lump-sum management requires careful work package design
Erasmus+ Capacity Building in VET – Western Balkans (CB-VET) – ERASMUS-EDU-2026-CB-VET-WB	EU (Serbia)	Education and Training, Mobility, Digital	Targets: VET centers, Schools, Trainers/Teachers	Value: Max €500,000 per project	Open (Call published 2026, deadline	No	Eligibility for Western Balkans window depends on Serbia's

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Link: https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/funding-opportunities_en		transformation, Social inclusion, capacity building of VET institutions	rs, Student Applicants: Partnerships of organisations from EU MS / Programme-associated countries and third countries not associated to the Programme; must include ≥1 secondary-level VET provider	Co-funding: No mandatory co-financing rate; typically 100% of eligible costs covered up to ceiling	expected mid-2026; check FT&P portal)		status (currently associated to Erasmus+ as Programme country); single org cannot coordinate >2 proposals
Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships and Small-scale Partnerships in VET (KA220-VET / KA210-VET) Link: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/opportunities-for-organisations/cooperation-among-organisations-and-institutions	EU (Serbia)	Education and Training, Digital transformation, Social inclusion, Mobility, curriculum development	Targets: VET centers, Schools, SMEs, Industry, Trainers/Teachers, Student Applicants: Min. 3 organisations from 3 Programme countries (KA220); 2	Value: KA220-VET: €120,000–€400,000; KA210-VET: €30,000 or €60,000 lump sum Co-funding: Lump-sum / grant – no separate	Open (annual calls managed by National Agencies; 2026 deadlines March/October)	Yes	Lower ticket size than CoVE; managed via Tempus Foundation in Serbia – familiar process; useful as 'maintenance' funding between large CoVE projects

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
			organisations from 2 countries (KA210)	co-financing rate			
Erasmus+ Alliances for Innovation (KA2 – Lot 1: HE-VET-business; Lot 2: Sectoral Skills) Link: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/opportunities-for-organisations/innovation-co-operation/alliances-innovation	EU (Serbia)	Research and development, Education and Training, Digital transformation, sectoral upskilling/reskilling, Industry-academia collaboration	Targets: VET centers, Industry, SMEs, Trainers/Teachers, Student Applicants: Lot 1: ≥8 partners from ≥4 MS incl. HEIs, VET providers, businesses; Lot 2: ≥12 partners from ≥8 MS incl. social partners, sectoral representatives	Value: Lot 1: up to €1.5M per project; Lot 2: up to €4M per project (Blueprint) Co-funding: Lump-sum grant	Open (annual call; deadline typically Feb/March)	Yes	Sectoral Skills (Blueprint) ideal for welding/manufacturing but very competitive; requires strong sectoral coverage – complementary to PI-FORWARD CoVE as a follow-up vehicle
Horizon Europe – Widening Participation and Strengthening the European Research Area (WIDERA) – Twinning, Hop-On Facility, ERA Chairs, Excellence Hubs Link: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/widening-participation	EU (Serbia)	Research and development, Digital transformation, networking with leading EU research institutions	Targets: VET centers (as research-active organisations), Industry, SMEs, Trainers/Teachers	Value: Twinning: up to €1.5M; Hop-On: €200,000–€600,000; ERA Chairs: €1.5–€2.5M;	Open (WP 2026–2027 published; calls staggered through 2026 and 2027)	Yes	Requires building partnerships with top-tier EU institutions; success rates 15–25% depending on scheme; reporting load is significant

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
participation-and-strengthening-european-research-area_en			Applicants: Serbia is eligible as a Widening country – Serbian organisations can coordinate Twinning, Hop-On, ERA Chairs, Excellence Hubs	Excellence Hubs: €1.5–€4.5M Co-funding: 100% funding rate for non-profit; 70% for for-profit (RIA)			
Horizon Europe – Cluster 4 (Digital, Industry & Space) and MSCA Staff Exchanges / Doctoral Networks Link: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en	EU (Serbia)	Research and development, Digital transformation, AI, advanced manufacturing, Mobility (researchers), Industry-academia exchange	Targets: VET centers, Industry, SMEs, Trainers/Teachers, Student (PhD/postdoc) Applicants: Serbia fully associated to Horizon Europe – Serbian organisations can apply / coordinate on equal terms	Value: Cluster 4 RIA/IA: typical €2–€10M per project; MSCA Staff Exchanges: ~€1M; Doctoral Networks: ~€3M Co-funding: 100% funding rate for non-profit; 70%	Open (rolling calls under WP 2026–2027)	Yes	Highly competitive; typically requires consortia of 5+ partners across MS; long proposal preparation (6+ months); reporting and audit-heavy

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
				for for-profit (IA actions)			
Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL) – Advanced Digital Skills, AI, European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs) Link: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/digital-programme	EU (Serbia)	Digital transformation, Education and Training (advanced digital skills), AI, cybersecurity	Targets: VET centers, Industry, SMEs, Trainers/Teachers, Student Applicants: Serbia is associated to DIGITAL – Serbian organisations can participate; for EDIH actions, designation by national authorities is required	Value: Typical project size €1M–€20M; AI testing facilities and EDIHs at higher end Co-funding: Co-financing rates 50% (most actions) to 100% (Specific Objective 4 – Skills)	Open (annual Work Programmes; calls under WP 2025–2027 ongoing)	No	Co-financing requirement is a barrier (50% in many cases); EDIH route requires national designation process
Single Market Programme (SMP) – COSME pillar (SME competitiveness) and Enterprise Europe Network Link: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/smes_en	EU (Serbia)	Education and Training (entrepreneurship), Mobility (Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs),	Targets: SMEs, Industry, Trainers/Teachers (as mentors) Applicants: Serbia	Value: Variable: from small mobility grants (€1,000–€10,000 per	Open (rolling calls)	No	Most relevant for SME beneficiaries; useful as a complementary stream to engage company partners of the CoVE

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
		Digital transformation, internationalisation	participates in COSME pillar and is part of Enterprise Europe Network through CCI Serbia and RAS	entrepreneur) to larger calls €1M–€5M Co-funding: Co-financing typically 50–75%			

METU

The following table details mapped funding programs, target groups, eligibility criteria, budget parameters, and key strategic challenges identified for METU:

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
KOSGEB Link: https://www.kosgeb.gov.tr/site/tr/genel/destekdetay/7664/arge-urge-ve-inovasyon-destek-programi	National (Turkiye)	innovation, infrastructure, research and development etc.	Targets: SMEs, VET providers, universities, public bodies, Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: N/A	Open	N/A	N/A
TUBİTAK Link: https://tubitak.gov.tr/tr/destekler/akademik/ulusal-destek-programlari	National (Turkiye)	innovation, infrastructure, research and development etc.	Targets: SMEs, VET providers, universities, public bodies, Applicants: Research and development centers and HE	Value: N/A Co-funding: N/A	Open	N/A	N/A

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
TUBİTAK Link: https://tubitak.gov.tr/tr/destekler/sanayi/ulusal-destek-programlari	National (Turkiye)	innovation, infrastructure, research and development etc.	Targets: SMEs, VET providers, universities, public bodies, Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: N/A	Open	N/A	N/A
Horizon Europe Link: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en	EU (Turkiye)	innovation, infrastructure, research and development etc.	Targets: SMEs, VET providers, universities, public bodies, Applicants: Companies, training providers, public institutions, partnerships	Value: N/A Co-funding: N/A	Open	N/A	N/A

IIS

The following table details mapped funding programs, target groups, eligibility criteria, budget parameters, and key strategic challenges identified for IIS:

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
BANDO DIANA (Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic) – Challenge Call 2026	National (Italy)	Training	Targets: Ricerca e innovazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	3 luglio 2026	N/A	N/A
Call4INNOVIT 2026: accelerazione per startup e PMI italiane verso la Silicon Valley	National (Italy)	Training	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione; Start Up Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	21 luglio 2026	N/A	N/A
Formazione gratuita per le imprese del territorio	National (Italy)	Training	Targets: Formazione; Digitalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	31 luglio 2026	N/A	N/A
Open Call ELEVATEX per la digitalizzazione delle PMI nel settore tessile	National (Italy)	Digital	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione; Digitalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	31 luglio 2026	N/A	N/A
C4B Open Call: finanziamenti per progetti pilota nella bioeconomia circolare	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione; Sostenibilità; Ambiente ed Energia	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	14 agosto 2026	N/A	N/A

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Applicants: Companies							
Bandi Europei per R&S&I 'Clean Industrial Deal'	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione; Ambiente ed Energia; Sostenibilità	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	15 settembre 2026	N/A	N/A
Applicants: Companies							
European Defence Fund - EDF 2026	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	29 settembre 2026	N/A	N/A
Applicants: Companies							
Agevolazioni regionali per progetti di ricerca e sviluppo	Regional (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	30 settembre 2026	N/A	N/A
Applicants: Companies							
Seconda Open Call MANTRA	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione; Digitalizzazione	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	30 settembre 2026	N/A	N/A
Applicants: Companies							
Bandi Life 2025	EU (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione; Sostenibilità; Ambiente ed Energia	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	settembre 2026	N/A	N/A
Applicants: Companies							

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Agevolazioni camerali nuove PMI - Modena	Regional (Italy)	Mobility	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	2 ottobre 2026	N/A	N/A
Agevolazioni camerali sistemi di sicurezza - Modena	National (Italy)	Mobility	Targets: Salute e Sicurezza; Ricerca e Innovazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	20 novembre 2026	N/A	N/A
SIMEST Energia per la competitività internazionale	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Liquidità; Digitalizzazione; Ambiente ed Energia Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	31 dicembre 2026 (salvo esaurimento risorse)	N/A	N/A
Agevolazioni camerali nuove PMI giovanili - Ferrara	National (Italy)	Mobility	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	22 gennaio 2027 (salvo esaurimento)	N/A	N/A
Agevolazioni camerali PMI giovanili <3 anni - Ferrara	National (Italy)	Mobility	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	22 gennaio 2027 (salvo esaurimento)	N/A	N/A
BERS Fondo ENEF II	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Internazionalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	anno 2027	N/A	N/A

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Agevolazioni nazionali investimenti imprese esportatrici	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Liquidità; Ambiente ed Energia; Digitalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Fino a esaurimento risorse	N/A	N/A
SIMEST Competitività imprese e filiere in America	National (Italy)	Mobility	Targets: Internazionalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Fino a esaurimento risorse	N/A	N/A
SIMEST nuova misura Africa	National (Italy)	Mobility	Targets: Internazionalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Fino a esaurimento risorse	N/A	N/A
SIMEST Affiancamento strategico mercato indiano	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Internazionalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Fino a esaurimento risorse	N/A	N/A
SIMEST Inserimento mercati	National (Italy)	Mobility	Targets: Internazionalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Fino a esaurimento risorse	N/A	N/A
SIMEST Commercio elettronico	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Internazionalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Fino a esaurimento risorse	N/A	N/A

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
SIMEST Fiere ed Eventi	National (Italy)	Mobility	Targets: Internazionalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Fino a esaurimento risorse	N/A	N/A
SIMEST Temporary Manager	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Internazionalizzazione; Sostenibilità; Digitalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Fino a esaurimento risorse	N/A	N/A
SIMEST Certificazioni e consulenze	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Internazionalizzazione; Sostenibilità; Digitalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Fino a esaurimento risorse	N/A	N/A
Nuova Misura SIMEST per gli Stati Uniti	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Internazionalizzazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Non ha scadenza	N/A	N/A
Nuova Sabatini	National (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione Applicants: Companies	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Non ha scadenza	N/A	N/A
Horizon Europe EIC Accelerator	EU (Italy)	Infrastructure	Targets: Ricerca e Innovazione; Startup	Value: N/A Co-funding: YES	Non ha scadenza	N/A	N/A

Funding Programme Name	Level / Region	Relevant Activities	Target Groups & Eligibility	Funding & Co-funding	Status	Experience	Challenges & Considerations
Applicants: Companies							



Harmonised Funding Categories & Strategic Framework

The following matrix synthesises the regional, national, and European funding opportunities mapped across partner organisations (ISIM, CERTH, EWF, HELIXCONNECT, METU, IIS). It establishes six harmonised categories aligning partner capabilities with COVE-EXSEE objectives.

Harmonised Category	Common Objectives	Typical Funding Sources	Relevance to COVE-EXSEE
VET Infrastructure, Modernisation & Skills Excellence	Capacity building, curriculum modernisation, trainer development, learner/staff mobility, vocational excellence, upskilling and reskilling in critical technologies	EU direct: Erasmus+ Centres of Vocational Excellence, Capacity Building in VET, Cooperation Partnerships / Small-scale Partnerships. National / ESF+ examples: STEP-EDU and STEP-LLL (Romania), PESSOAS 2030 (Portugal), ESF+ education and skills measures in Greece	Capacity building, training delivery, trainer development, curriculum and learning-resource development, and support for vocational excellence
Innovation, Research & Technology Transfer	Applied research, innovation ecosystems, technology development and uptake, technology transfer, university–industry cooperation, demonstration and testing	Horizon Europe, European Innovation Ecosystems, Interregional Innovation Investments (I3), national research and innovation agencies such as TÜBİTAK, Innovation Fund Serbia and similar national schemes	Pilot activities, R&D brokerage, innovation services, technology transfer, collaboration between CoVEs, SMEs and research organisations
Regional Development, Infrastructure & Investment	Investment in laboratories, equipment, training infrastructure, demonstration facilities, regional competitiveness and innovation capacity	ERDF, Recovery and Resilience Facility, regional development programmes, national/regional investment schemes	Development and modernisation of training centres, laboratories, digital infrastructure, shared facilities and demonstration environments

Harmonised Category	Common Objectives	Typical Funding Sources	Relevance to COVE-EXSEE
SME Competitiveness & Industrial Transformation	SME innovation, industrial digitalisation, productivity, entrepreneurship, business growth and technology adoption	National SME and innovation programmes, KOSGEB, innovation funds, regional SME schemes, cluster/innovation support schemes	SME engagement, technology adoption, work-based learning partnerships, industry-led pilots and stronger VET-SME collaboration
Digital & Green Transition	Advanced digital skills, Industry 4.0, AI, digital twins, sustainability, circular economy, energy/resource efficiency and green skills	Digital Europe Programme, Horizon Europe Cluster 4, RRF measures, LIFE where relevant, national digitalisation and green-transition programmes	Development of digital and green competences, digital learning tools, AI/digital-twin applications, modernisation of training delivery and integration of sustainability into technical training
Regional Cooperation & Ecosystem Development	Cross-sector partnerships, interregional cooperation, regional skills and innovation ecosystems, peer learning, networking and transfer of practices	Interreg programmes, Interregional Innovation Investments (I3), Erasmus+ cooperation actions, European Innovation Ecosystems and regional cooperation initiatives	Strengthening regional CoVE ecosystems, cross-border collaboration, peer learning, networking, transferability and joint service development

Annex 2– Interview Guideline

COVE-EXSEE PROJECT
Combined Stakeholder Consultation
Support Structure Requirements (T2.1.1) & Sustainability Feasibility (T4.2.2)

⚠ PARTICIPANT INFORMATION & GDPR CONSENT

Who is collecting your data?

This consultation is conducted by **INCD ISIM Timișoara** (project coordinator) on behalf of the COVE-EXSEE consortium, funded under Erasmus+ call ERASMUS-EDU-2025-PI-FORWARD-VET-VE. The consortium includes: EWF (Portugal), CERTH (Greece), HELIXCONNECT Balkans (Serbia), IIS (Italy), IIW (Italy), and METU (Turkey).

Why are we collecting your information?

This single session serves **two related project tasks**:

- WP2 / T2.1.1 – to refine the functional requirements for regional VET support structures (help-desks, digital repositories, peer-learning clusters);
- WP4 / T4.2.2 – to gather expert feedback on the sustainability requirements and long-term feasibility of these same structures beyond the project's funding period.

Your responses will be compiled into two separate task reports, one per work package, but collected together in a single meeting to reduce the burden on participants and partners.

What data will be collected?

During this consultation we may collect: your name and professional role; your organisation's name and country; your responses to the discussion questions in this form; and any additional comments you choose to share.

How will your data be used and stored?

All data will be processed in accordance with the **EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679**. Your responses will be:

- Anonymised in any public project reports or publications
- Stored securely on the consortium's password-protected SharePoint environment
- Accessible only to COVE-EXSEE project team members (WP2 and WP4 leads)

- Retained for the duration of the project (until 36 months after start) and deleted thereafter, unless required by EU audit obligations

Your rights under GDPR:

You have the right to **access, correct, or request deletion** of your personal data at any time. You may withdraw your consent without consequence by contacting the project manager: aperianu@isim.ro

CONSENT DECLARATION

Please tick all boxes to confirm your consent before the meeting begins.

- ☐ I have read and understood the above information about how my data will be used, including its use for both T2.1.1 and T4.2.2 reporting.
- ☐ I consent to my responses being recorded — either in writing by the facilitator during a live session, or directly by me if completing this form independently.
- ☐ I consent to my anonymised responses being used in project reports, publications, and deliverables of COVE-EXSEE (WP2 and WP4).
- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without consequence.
- ☐ I consent to being contacted for follow-up consultation or to receive a copy of the meeting notes. *(optional — only if you wish to be contacted again)*

Participant signature

Participant	COVE-EXSEE Facilitator
Name: _____ —	Name: _____ —
Signature: _____ —	Signature: _____ —
Date: _____ —	Date: _____ —



Note: A copy of this signed consent form will be retained by the project coordinator (ISIM) and filed in the project documentation system. A copy will be shared with the participant upon request.

① About This Consultation — Two Tasks, One Session

This session combines two distinct activities from the COVE-EXSEE work plan, both centred on the same subject: the regional **support structures** — help-desks, digital repositories, peer-learning clusters — that the project is designing for VET providers, SMEs and public authorities in welding, NDT and advanced manufacturing. They are run together to reduce the burden on partners and stakeholders, but each has a different objective and feeds a different deliverable.

Task 2.1.1 — Stakeholder Consultations (WP2, led by ISIM)

"Initial meetings with VET providers, SMEs and authorities to refine functional requirements for support structures."

In practice: we want to understand what services a regional support structure (help-desk, digital repository, peer-learning cluster) should actually offer, who should run it, and what would make stakeholders use it.

Task 4.2.2 — Stakeholder Consultations (WP4, led by HELIX)

"Organise expert interviews and regional focus groups to gather feedback on sustainability requirements and feasibility."

In practice: we want to understand whether the support structure designed under Task 2.1 can realistically continue to operate after the project's funding ends in M36 — who would own it, how it would be financed, and what risks could threaten its survival.

Note: Both tasks are stakeholder consultations under the same Erasmus+ proposal, but Task 2.1.1 asks "what should this structure do?" while Task 4.2.2 asks "can this structure survive long-term, and how?" Keep this distinction in mind when facilitating — Section A and Section B of this form correspond directly to these two questions.

How to use this form

This form is self-explanatory and can be used in either of the following ways:

- Live session — the facilitator together with stakeholder records the answers directly on the form during the meeting.

- Independent / email completion – if meeting time is limited, the facilitator can send this form to the stakeholder afterwards. Every question already includes what information is needed and why, so it can be completed without further explanation and returned by email.

What do we mean by a "support structure"?

Throughout this consultation, "**support structure**" refers to a regional or national service – such as a help-desk, a digital resource repository, or a peer-learning cluster – to be created under COVE-EXSEE. Its purpose is to help VET providers, SMEs and public authorities access training, technical advice, certification support, and EU funding opportunities related to welding, NDT and advanced manufacturing.

It is **not a new physical institution** – it is a coordinated set of services, hosted by an existing organisation (e.g. a VET institution, industry body, or research centre).

- Section A of this form explores **what services** this structure should include and how it should work.
- Section B of this form explores **whether and how** it can keep operating after the project's EU funding ends (after Month 36).

0. Meeting Details

Meeting Reference	<i>e.g. REF-2.1.1+4.2.2-RO-01</i>
Date & Time	<i>[DD/MM/YYYY] [HH:MM – HH:MM]</i>
Platform / Location	<i>[Zoom / Teams / On-site]</i>
Stakeholder Group	
Organisation(s)	<i>[Name of organisation(s)]</i>
Participant(s) & Role(s)	<i>[Name – Title / Role]</i>
COVE-EXSEE Facilitator	<i>[Name – Partner organisation]</i>
Partner(s) present	<i>[ISIM / EWF / HELIX / CERTH / METU / IIS / IIW]</i>

Stakeholder group – please tick: ☐ VET Provider ☐ SME / Industry ☐ Public Authority ☐ Expert / Researcher ☐ Mixed

Country / region – please tick: ☐ Romania (RO) ☐ Greece (GR) ☐ Serbia (RS) ☐ Italy (IT) ☐ Turkey (TR) ☐ Portugal (PT) ☐ Other:

0.1 Session Agenda (~30 minutes total)

#	Agenda Item	Duration	Lead
1	Welcome, introductions & purpose of the combined session	3 min	Facilitator
2	SECTION A – Support structure requirements (T2.1.1)	10 min	All
3	SECTION B – Sustainability & feasibility (T4.2.2)	10 min	All
4	Wrap-up, action points & next steps	7 min	Facilitator

Note: This session combines two distinct project tasks. Section A informs the WP2 functional requirements report (T2.1.1); Section B informs the WP4 sustainability/feasibility report (T4.2.2). Keep the two sections clearly separated when taking notes, as they will be compiled into separate deliverables.

A. Support Structure Requirements [T2.1.1 – WP2] ~10 min

Note: All responses in this section feed the WP2 Pilot / Operational Plan report for Task D 2.1

A.1 What is your organisation's main activity in the VET / industrial training / regulatory landscape in your region?

i What we need from you: A short description of your organisation's main activity (e.g. training provider, employer, certifying authority, regional agency).

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Helps us understand the context in which a support structure would operate, and group your input together with similar organisations during analysis.

e.g. training provider, employer, certifying authority, regional agency...

A.2 What are the biggest challenges you face related to skills development or VET quality? (tick all that apply)

i What we need from you: Tick the challenges your organisation currently faces. Add any other challenge not listed.

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Identifies which problems are most common across the region, so the new support structure prioritises solving the right issues first.

- ☐ **Lack of up-to-date training content (digital / green skills)**
- ☐ **Limited access to equipment or technology (e.g. simulators, digital tools)**
- ☐ **Insufficient collaboration between VET providers, industry and authorities**
- ☐ **Difficulty attracting or retaining qualified trainers**
- ☐ **Weak links between training offer and actual labour market needs**
- ☐ **Lack of recognised micro-credentials or certification pathways**
- ☐ **Other (please specify below):**

Lack of students engagement

Please explain your choices below

A.3 How aware are you of the outputs from the three legacy CoVE projects this work builds on?

i What we need from you: For each project below, indicate how familiar you are with it and its outputs: • COVE-WENDT – welding & non-destructive testing (AR/VR welding simulators, modular NDT curricula EQF 4–6, trainer upskilling toolkit, EU micro-credential framework) • AILEEN – advanced manufacturing (advanced manufacturing course in Aerospace and Defence sector, EU micro-credential framework, excellence platform) • WELDNET – circular materials & inclusion (digital resources for predictive manufacturing, circular-maintenance learning modules, social inclusion guidelines for NEET learners).

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Tells us which existing tools and materials are already known or valued in your region, so the new support structure builds on what already works instead of duplicating it.

Project	Never heard of it	Name only	Some outputs	Actively using
COVE-WENDT (Welding & NDT)	☐	☐	☐	☐
AILEEN (Advanced Manufacturing)	☐	☐	☐	☐
WELDNET (Circular Materials & Inclusion)	☐	☐	☐	☐

Comments / which outputs are most relevant to you:

A.4 Which potential support structure functions would be most useful to your organisation?

i What we need from you: Rate each potential service as Must-have, Nice-to-have, or Not relevant. (R&D brokerage = connecting VET providers and companies for joint research/innovation projects; Peer-learning & cross-CoVE networking = structured exchange with other CoVE projects; Policy intelligence & funding alerts = monitoring EU funding such as ERDF/RRF and VET policy updates.)

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Your ratings directly shape which services are built into the regional support structure under WP2 – functions rated 'must-have' by several stakeholders will be prioritised for piloting.

Function / Service	✓ Must-have	✓ Nice-to-have	✗ Not relevant
Training coordination & scheduling	☐	☐	☐
R&D brokerage between VET providers and SMEs	☐	☐	☐
Advisory / help-desk (technical, certification, regulatory, governance)	☐	☐	☐
Digital resource repository (open-access platform)	☐	☐	☐
Peer-learning & cross-CoVE networking	☐	☐	☐
Micro-credential & certification support	☐	☐	☐
Policy intelligence & funding alerts	☐	☐	☐
Staff capacitation			
Best practices in training			

Why, please explain.

A.5 What training delivery format and hosting model would work best?

i What we need from you: Tick your preferred delivery format and who you think should host or manage the structure.

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Ensures the structure is delivered in a way you would actually use, and hosted by an organisation you would trust.

Format: ☐ Online ☐ Face-to-face ☐ Hybrid ☐ Self-paced ☐ No preference
 Hosting: ☐ VET institution ☐ Research centre ☐ Industry body ☐ Regional authority ☐ Consortium-managed ☐ Other:

Please explain your selections

A.6 What practical constraints should the design team be aware of? (*tick all that apply*)

i What we need from you: Tick any practical constraints that apply to your organisation (time, digital literacy, language, budget, legal/regulatory limits).

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Helps us design around real, existing barriers instead of assuming ideal conditions that don't match your situation.

- ☐ **Limited staff time / capacity**
- ☐ **Low digital literacy or limited IT infrastructure**
- ☐ **Language barriers**
- ☐ **Budget or co-financing constraints**
- ☐ **Legal / regulatory limitations**
- ☐ **Other (please specify):**

Please explain them below

A.7 Are there functions not listed above that you consider essential?

i What we need from you: Describe any additional service or function you consider essential that is not already listed in A.4.

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Makes sure the support structure doesn't miss something important specific to your context.

B. Sustainability & Feasibility [T4.2.2 – WP4] ~10 min

Note: All responses in this section feed the WP4 Sustainability Strategy report for Task 4.2.2.

B.1 How feasible do you think it is for this kind of support structure to remain operational after the project ends (post-M36)?

i What we need from you: Rate, from 'Not feasible' to 'Very high', how realistic you think it is for this support structure to keep running after the project's EU funding ends. (Post-M36 = after the 36-month funding period.)

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Gives the project team an early, independent reality check on viability before finalising the WP4 sustainability strategy.

Item	Not feasible	Low	Moderate	High	Very high
Overall feasibility of post-project continuation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Brief justification (optional)					

B.2 What financial or business models could realistically sustain it long-term?
(tick all that apply)

i What we need from you: Tick which financing or business models seem realistic for your context. (ERDF = EU Regional Development Fund; RRF = EU Recovery and Resilience Facility; Cluster vouchers = a model where several organisations share the cost of a shared service.)

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Shapes the funding mix the project proposes in its WP4 sustainability strategy.

- ☐ **Service fees paid by users (SMEs, learners, institutions)**
- ☐ **Cluster vouchers / shared cost-pooling between organisations**
- ☐ **EU structural funds (ERDF, RRF)**
- ☐ **National or regional VET funding schemes**
- ☐ **Private sponsorship / industry co-financing**
- ☐ **Public-private partnership model**
- ☐ **Other (please specify):**

B.3 Would your organisation be willing to co-finance, contribute in-kind, or pay for services after the project ends?

i What we need from you: Indicate whether — and how — your organisation would be willing to contribute financially or in-kind once EU funding ends.

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Tests whether real commitment exists beyond general interest, which is essential for any sustainability plan to actually work.

☐ Yes, financially ☐ Yes, in-kind (staff/time/equipment) ☐ Possibly – depends on terms ☐ No

At what level / under what conditions:

B.4 Who should take ownership / governance of the structure beyond the project? (*tick most appropriate*)

i What we need from you: Tick who you think should own and run the structure once the project ends.

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Avoids designing a structure that has no clear future owner once EU funding stops.

☐ VET institution ☐ Regional / national authority ☐ Industry body / cluster
☐ Consortium partner ☐ Newly created independent entity ☐ Other:

B.5 What policy or regulatory support would be needed to ensure continuity?

i What we need from you: Describe any policy or regulatory change or support that would help the structure continue operating.

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Feeds the project's policy recommendations and advocacy activities under WP3 and WP4.

B.6 What are the main risks to long-term continuation, and what would mitigate them?

i What we need from you: Rate how serious each risk is for the structure's long-term survival, and suggest ways to reduce it.

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Lets the project build targeted mitigation measures into the sustainability strategy, focused on the risks stakeholders see as most likely.

Item	Low risk	Moderate	High risk
Loss of key staff / institutional knowledge	☐	☐	☐
Lack of sustained funding	☐	☐	☐
Low long-term stakeholder engagement	☐	☐	☐

Regulatory or policy change	☐	☐	☐
Technology becoming outdated	☐	☐	☐

Mitigation ideas:

B.7 Would you be willing to sign an MoU or other formal commitment supporting continuation of the structure?

i What we need from you: Indicate your willingness to formalise cooperation through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) – a non-binding cooperation agreement.

→ **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** MoUs are the mechanism the project uses to secure committed long-term partners once EU funding ends.

☐ Yes ☐ Possibly – need more information ☐ No ☐ Already engaged with the consortium

C. Funding authorities

This section should only be completed by representatives of funding authorities.

C.1 What is your organisation's role in supporting skills development, vocational education and regional innovation?

C.2 Which vocational excellence areas should receive greater investment in future funding programmes?

C.3 What training delivery format and hosting model would have more chance to receive funding?

C.4 Which current funding programmes are most relevant for Centres of Vocational Excellence and vocational skills ecosystems?

C.5 Which policy priorities (digital transition, green transition, advanced manufacturing, regional development, skills) are expected to receive greater investment over the next few years?

C.6 Which programmes could finance

- training delivery
- infrastructure
- equipment
- digital platforms
- capacity building
- regional cooperation

C.7 Which potential services would have more possibility to receive funding?

Function / Service	High	✓ Nice-to-have
Training coordination & scheduling	☐	☐
R&D brokerage between VET providers and SMEs	☐	☐
Advisory / help-desk (technical, certification, regulatory, governance)	☐	☐
Digital resource repository (open-access platform)	☐	☐
Peer-learning & cross-CoVE networking	☐	☐
Micro-credential & certification support	☐	☐
Policy intelligence & funding alerts	☐	☐
Staff capacitation		
Best practices in training		

C.8 Which funding mechanisms do you consider most suitable for ensuring the long-term sustainability of CoVE support structures?

- ☐ ERDF
- ☐ ESF+
- ☐ National VET schemes
- ☐ Public-private partnerships
- ☐ Service-based model

☐ Industry co-financing

Please explain your selection/s

C.9 Would your organisation be interested in participating in future stakeholder consultations or policy dialogue related to CoVE sustainability?

D. Policy makers

D.1 What is your organisation's role in shaping skills development, vocational education and regional development policies?

i What we need from you: Briefly describe your organisation's responsibilities related to skills, VET, innovation or regional development
 → **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Helps us understand your perspective and policy responsibilities

D.2 What are the main challenges preventing vocational education providers and Centres of Vocational Excellence from responding effectively to regional skills needs?

i What we need from you: Identify the most significant policy, governance or systemic challenges.
 → **Why we're asking / what we'll do with it:** Identifies policy gaps that future support structures should address.

D.3 Which policy priorities do you expect to become increasingly important over the next five years?

- ☐ Digital transition
- ☐ Green transition
- ☐ Industrial competitiveness
- ☐ Strategic autonomy
- ☐ SME innovation
- ☐ Regional development
- ☐ Social inclusion
- ☐ Skills intelligence
- ☐ Lifelong learning
- ☐ Other: _____

D.4 Where do you see the biggest policy gaps in supporting vocational excellence?

(Select up to three.)

- ☐ Insufficient cooperation between education and industry
- ☐ Lack of long-term funding
- ☐ Limited teacher capacity
- ☐ Weak regional governance
- ☐ Skills mismatch
- ☐ Limited digital infrastructure
- ☐ Fragmented certification systems
- ☐ Lack of labour market intelligence
- ☐ Weak stakeholder coordination
- ☐ Other: _____

→ **Why we're asking:** Identifies areas where policy intervention is needed.

D.5 Which policy measures would most strengthen Centres of Vocational Excellence?

- ☐ Better funding mechanisms
- ☐ Regional partnerships

- ☐ Stronger industry engagement
- ☐ More flexible qualifications (e.g. micro-credentials, modular training, recognition of prior learning etc.)
- ☐ Simplified administrative procedures
- ☐ Better labour market intelligence and skills forecasting
- ☐ Digital infrastructure
- ☐ Teacher professional development
- ☐ International cooperation
- ☐ Other: _____

D.6 Which support structure functions would create the greatest public value?

Function / Service	High	Priority	Medium	Low
Regional skills intelligence	☐	☐	☐	☐
Education–industry coordination	☐	☐	☐	☐
Policy advice	☐	☐	☐	☐
Funding guidance	☐	☐	☐	☐
Digital resource platform	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teacher capacity building	☐	☐	☐	☐
Innovation brokerage	☐	☐	☐	☐
Quality assurance support	☐	☐	☐	☐
Micro-credentials	☐	☐	☐	☐

D.7 What policy or regulatory barriers currently limit the development of vocational excellence?

(Open question)

D.8 What recommendations would you make to strengthen vocational excellence ecosystems in your country?

(Open question)

E. Action Points & Next Steps

Tick the relevant task tag for each action so items can be filtered when compiling the two separate task reports.

#	Action	Responsible	Deadline	Task		
1				☐ 2.1.1	☐ 4.2.2	☐ Both
2				☐ 2.1.1	☐ 4.2.2	☐ Both
3				☐ 2.1.1	☐ 4.2.2	☐ Both
4				☐ 2.1.1	☐ 4.2.2	☐ Both
5				☐ 2.1.1	☐ 4.2.2	☐ Both

Next steps agreed:

☐ Meeting notes to be shared with participant within: _____ working days

☐ 2.1.1 ☐ 4.2.2 ☐ Both Follow-up consultation scheduled for:

☐ 2.1.1 ☐ 4.2.2 ☐ Both MoU draft to be sent by:

☐ 2.1.1 ☐ 4.2.2 ☐ Both Other:

F. Additional Notes & Observations

Use this space for observations not captured above. Please mark each note with (A) or (B) to indicate which task it relates to.

G. Facilitator Sign-Off

Note: This form must be completed and uploaded to the consortium SharePoint within 48 hours of the session (or upon receiving the stakeholder's completed form, if sent independently). Section A data feeds the T2.1.1 progress log (WP2); Section B data feeds the T4.2.2 progress log (WP4). The GDPR consent page must be filed separately in the secure document vault.

Facilitator Sign-off

Name: _____



Partner organisation: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Consortium

COVE-EXSEE is delivered by a consortium of 7 partners from 6 countries across South-East Europe, coordinated by ISIM Timișoara (Romania). The partners combine deep expertise in welding, NDT, advanced manufacturing, vocational education and digital innovation to build a region-wide skills ecosystem.



ISIM Timișoara

Romania · Coordinator



CERTH
CENTRE FOR
RESEARCH & TECHNOLOGY
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Greece · Partner



EWF

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HelixConnect Balkans

Serbia · Partner



IIS

Italy · Partner



IIW

Italy · Partner



Middle East Technical University (METU)

Türkiye · Partner