Policy Brief

Bridging Vocational Excellence and Dual Higher Education for Regional Resilience

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Forum on Vocational Excellence: Policy Dialogue

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Introduction

On September 7-9, 2026, the Forum on Vocational Excellence titled *"Dual Education and Training for Competitive Regions"* took place in Graz, Austria and was organized jointly by FH JOANNEUM, the European University Alliance EU4Dual and the Community of Practice of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoP CoVEs). Focusing on best practices from both VET and higher education, the program included a high-level policy dialogue which brought together representatives from the European Commission, national and regional authorities, vocational education and training, higher education, industry, Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), European University Alliances and skills networks.

The goal of this dialogue was to explore how Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and European University Alliances can work together to strengthen regional development, resilience and competitiveness by building stronger interfaces between vocational education and training (VET) and dual higher education.

This policy brief summarizes the key contributions and recommendations from the policy dialogue. It is structured around three essential questions: (1) how VET and dual higher education systems can better align in order to respond to evolving regional skills needs, (2) how cooperation between VET providers, higher education institutions and industry can contribute to stronger regional innovation ecosystems and finally (3) what governance and funding arrangements are required to strengthen cooperation between CoVEs, European Alliances, VET, higher education and industry.

Policy Rationale

Europe's regions face converging transformations such as rapid technological change and AI impacting on industries and their supply chains, the green transition, demographic shifts and geopolitical uncertainty leading to migration and associated challenges along. These factors require agile education and training systems that can rapidly adapt to changing skills needs while offering learners flexible and resilient pathways.

Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and European University Alliances provide complementary structures to address these challenges. The policy dialogue highlighted opportunities to systematically connect their strengths and build bridges between VET, dual higher education, industry, and regional development. One important success factor would be the improvement in recognition of qualifications obtained abroad. Due to the demographic changes which affect European society, it is essential to secure sufficient workforce in the European labor market by encouraging recognition pathways and non-traditional careers.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Aligning the VET and Dual Higher Education System

To create seamless pathways between VET and dual higher education, systems must preserve each sector's strengths while enabling smooth transitions through recognized qualifications and recognition of prior learning. Regional success stories can serve as best practices for larger initiatives.

Strengthening permeability between VET and dual higher education

- Develop joint and dual study programs with transparent pathways between vocational and academic qualifications, allowing learners to move smoothly between VET and higher education. Internationally recognized qualifications and labels, such as the European Degree Label and future European initiatives in vocational education and training (EU-VET-diploma), could support permeability between sectors. This would ease the transition from VET to higher education and vice versa while also ensuring an automatic recognition of vocational skills.
- Enhance the recognition of prior learning (RPL) by systematically developing internationally recognized credit systems for VET, enabling bidirectional transitions between VET and higher education.
- Regional models, such as the Dutch “Doorstroom”[1]-Model or the Austrian “Studieren ohne Matura”[2], can serve as catalysts for permeability models that demonstrate how smooth transitions between VET and dual higher education can work in practice.

Leverage Microcredentials as bridges across sectors and lifelong learning

- Microcredentials should be embedded in coherent learning pathways and recognition frameworks. They should be developed across all EQF levels with transparent progression and bridging opportunities between the levels in place and be promoted in industry to enable quick and relevant upskilling for the benefit of the needs of companies.
- Given the dual education system’s close industry ties and agility, Microcredentials developed in collaboration with HEIs and businesses, such as those under the EU4Dual framework, can rapidly address emerging skills gaps. By aligning Microcredentials with current labor market demands, this approach ensures learners acquire relevant, future-proof competencies while supporting upskilling and reskilling.

2. Regional Innovation Ecosystem

We advocate for regionally anchored skills ecosystems where VET, HEIs, industry, and public actors collaboratively address labor market needs. By aligning talent development, applied research, and knowledge valorization, regions can create self-reinforcing cycles of innovation and employability, while avoiding duplication of European initiatives. These regional skills ecosystems should be closely connected to the innovation strategy of the respective region.

Establish regional skills ecosystems

[1] Moving on from MBO to HBO
[2] Studieren ohne Matura - FH JOANNEUM

- Develop coordinated regional skills strategies that bring together VET providers, HEIs, companies, research organizations, chambers, and public authorities. The Centres of Vocational Excellence set a good example for building regional and local skills ecosystems that higher education and European University Alliances can learn from. Dual education institutions, with their close ties to industry and labor market needs, should be systematically integrated to support reskilling and upskilling. Establishing Knowledge Valorization Hubs focused on regional specializations ensures alignment between all education levels and industry needs, effectively transforming fragmented skills into a unified regional ecosystem.

Connect talent development with regional innovation

- Regional competitiveness increasingly depends on the ability to connect talent development, skills formation and innovation within a coherent ecosystem. Aligning career orientation, talent identification, workplace learning, applied research, and knowledge valorization creates stronger links between education, industry and regional development priorities. The Styrian Economic Chamber's Talent Center[3] exemplifies this approach by offering guidance and talent assessments to pupils, strengthening connections between education providers, industry, and the labor market in Styria.
- Apprenticeship-oriented higher education models can provide an effective bridge between education, the workplace and regional industry, combining academic learning with structured workplace experience. They enable learners to develop relevant skills and talents in real-world environments while allowing companies to identify, nurture and retain emerging talent.

3. Governance and Funding Mechanisms

To ensure long-term sustainability and drive cooperation, governance and funding mechanisms must incentivize teachers, learners, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to engage in cross-sectoral collaboration.

Design incentive mechanisms for teachers, learners and small businesses

- Successful cooperation requires the active participation of those who use and deliver education and training. Teachers and trainers need dedicated resources and incentives to collaborate across institutional and sectoral boundaries, especially between VET and HEI. SMEs, with their limited staffing and resource capacities, require targeted support by e.g. regional or EU-based policy and funding instruments to engage effectively in these ecosystems and there must be appropriate incentive systems for teachers including promotion and other rewards for personal engagement.
- Mobility funding schemes should extend beyond traditional academic exchanges to include labor-market-focused models, such as short-term industry placements for VET and dual higher education

[3] Talentcenter der WKO Steiermark

students (e.g., 3–6-month internships abroad) and joint mobility programs between VET providers and HEIs, enabling students to combine work and study across borders.

Transition from projects to long-term ecosystems

- CoVEs and European University Alliances should be systematically connected to European, national and regional policy strategies. Successful project-based cooperation should evolve toward institutionalization and long-term sustainability. To support this endeavor, dedicated funding programs should provide incentives for cross-sector cooperation such as seed funding for applied research involving VET and industry or support for joint programs. Furthermore, the public-private partnership model should be utilized to scale successful pilot initiatives into long-term self-sustaining models.

Call to Action

Europe must move beyond its excellent but siloed systems to enhance connectivity between VET, higher education, and the regional economy. Key areas for collaboration include skills development, research and innovation, as well as upskilling and reskilling.

Europe should build on successful project-based initiatives and support their transition into sustainable regional ecosystems with long-term institutional commitment.

By strengthening permeability through joint program development, recognition of prior learning and targeted governance and funding models, both sectors can benefit significantly. Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and European University Alliances serve as complementary pillars for regional ecosystem development, ensuring that education and training remain responsive to the evolving needs of learners, industry, and regions.