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# Networking Methodology for VET Institutions



# Contents

- INTRODUCTION
- METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN PROCESS
- THE BENEFITS OF NETWORKING FOR VET
- MAIN CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES
- CHALLENGES FOUND BY THE PLACEYOUR CONSORTIUM

## **NETWORKING METHODOLOGY**

- PHASE 1: INITIAL PLANNING AND STAKEHOLDERS MAPPING
  - a) Defining the network's purpose
  - b) Mapping and segmenting stakeholders
  - c) Value proposition design
- PHASE 2: OUTREACH AND STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGEMENT
  - a) Communication Plan
  - b) Personal and Mass Outreach
  - c) Presentation Sessions / Kick-Off Workshops
- PHASE 3: RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND COLLABORATION
  - a) Stakeholders selection
  - b) Design flexible participation models
  - c) Participation Agreements
- PHASE 4: SUSTAINED PARTICIPATION AND LONG-TERM COMMITMENT
  - a) Strategies for Ongoing Collaboration
  - b) Methods for deep Stakeholders Engagement
- RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS
- SUCCESS STORIES AND CONCRETE EXAMPLES
- FINAL CONCLUSIONS FROM THE PLACEYOUR PROJECT CONSORTIUM
- REFERENCES

# INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly complex and competitive labor environment, Vocational Educational Training Institutions (VET) face the challenge of effectively connecting education with the labor market. One of the clearest ways to improve the effectiveness of VET systems is through the development of partnerships and collaborative networks with, companies, community, non-profit organizations, local authorities and other key stakeholders. By fostering these strategic alliances, VET providers can align their curricula more closely with industry demands, integrate practical experiences into learning processes, and offer learners up-to-date skill sets that enhance their employability. Moreover, such collaborations encourage the sharing of resources, expertise, and best practices, ultimately creating a more dynamic ecosystem in which all parties benefit.

In this context, the PlaceYour project has compiled recommendations and feedback derived from experiences developing local networks in the respective contexts of partner organizations in Italy, Greece, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia. Through these experiences, the project identified key factors such as determining common goals among stakeholders, establishing effective communication channels, and actively engaging local communities and the private sector. Based on this knowledge, PlaceYour has developed a flexible and practical methodology to guide VET institutions in creating effective stakeholder networks that increase their students' employability and strengthen their connection to the labor market.

## ABOUT PLACEYOUR



**PlaceYour is a co-funded project by European Union aimed at promoting the collaboration between VET organizations and companies in Latin America and Europe (Italy, Spain, Greece, Mexico, Colombia and Brazil) active in the tourism field for the creation of the Place Branding Designer job profile.**

**PlaceYour aims to implement an innovative training program for the creation and introduction into the labour market of the professional profile of "Place Branding Designer", which will have key competencies to activate and build sustainable, circular and inclusive territorial strategies of tourism, through the Place Branding Methodology.**

**website: <https://place-your.eu/>**

# METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN PROCESS



The Methodological Design Process was shaped through a collaborative effort among all PlaceYour project partners, who worked locally to establish structured and strategic Local Networks. These networks served not only as foundational elements for stakeholder engagement, but also as key instruments for collecting valuable insights that directly contributed to the development of a unified methodology.

Each partner followed a set of predefined guidelines to form their Local Network, ensuring a consistent framework across countries. At the same time, the methodology allowed for flexibility and contextual adaptation. This enabled partners to adjust strategies based on their local realities, ultimately enriching the process with diverse perspectives and tailored approaches.

The primary goal behind the creation of these networks was to foster professional collaboration between VET (Vocational Education and Training) organizations and key actors from the tourism sector. These stakeholders were invited to participate in various stages of the project, including:

- Focus Groups for the development of the needs analysis, which served as the basis for the training program design;
- Dissemination and promotion of the project's objectives, results, and impact;
- Contribution as experts or trainers in the training programme;
- Co-development and implementation of the PlaceYour Academy Lab;
- Active participation in the validation of local strategies created by the Place Branding Designers in selected destinations;
- Support for the integration of trained youth into the labor market through apprenticeships.





To ensure the relevance and quality of the networks, each partner was required to involve at least 10 strategic local stakeholders, including a balanced mix of five small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and five other relevant institutions. These included hospitality businesses, tour operators, tourism boards, local authorities, training institutions, non-profits, and consortia.

As a result of this process the corresponding local networks were established in the different countries:

- Italy = 15 Key stakeholders
- Spain = 10 key stakeholders
- Mexico = 15 Key stakeholders
- Colombia = 15 Key stakeholders
- Greece, = 15 Key stakeholders
- Brazil = 15 Key stakeholders

All steps and decisions during the network-building phase were systematically documented using a standardized format. This ensured the consistent collection of data and reflections from each partner. Based on this documentation, a set of recommendations and best practices was gathered from every country, enabling the co-creation of a single, robust methodology: *the Networking Methodology for VET Institutions*. This final framework is not only structured and comprehensive but also reflective of the real-world challenges and solutions identified across all partner contexts.

By integrating local learnings into a shared methodological foundation, the developed methodology ensures both adaptability and long-term sustainability of the model, strengthening collaboration between training providers and tourism stakeholders, and ultimately supporting the inclusion of young professionals in the labor market.



# THE BENEFITS OF NETWORKING FOR VET

- **Enhancing Training Relevance:**

- Collaboration with businesses ensures training programs align with industry needs.
- VET institutions can adapt curricula to match labor market demands, improving graduates' employability.
- VET networks enhance both the quality and quantity of training by addressing key employability skills.

- **Opportunities for Students:**

- Networking provides students with direct access to the labor market while still in training.
- Through networks, students can participate in internships, apprenticeships, dual training programs, and recruitment events.
- Early exposure to the work environment strengthens soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and initiative.

- **Institutional Benefits for VET Centers:**

- Networks enable institutions to share best practices, resources, and knowledge with other educational centers and organizations.
- Collaboration fosters innovation, helping educators and administrators stay aligned with evolving workforce needs.
- Being part of a network enhances institutional visibility, attracting new students, partners, and funding opportunities.

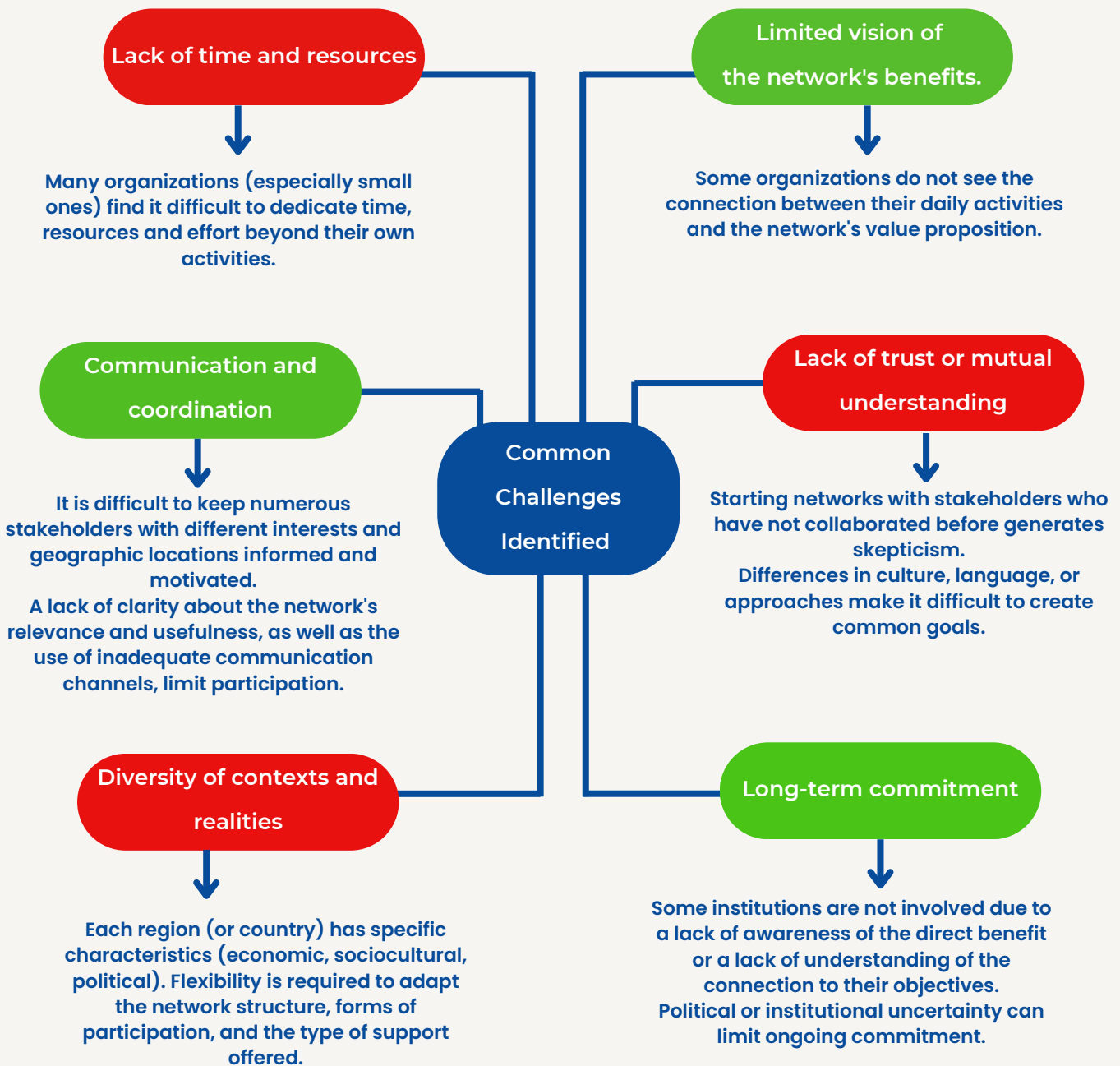
- **Advantages for Employers and Labor Market Stakeholders:**

- Participation in networks allows businesses to directly influence workforce development.
- Companies can communicate their talent needs, contribute to curriculum design, and connect with potential employees.
- A strong network reduces the skills gap, ensuring a pipeline of well-prepared candidates.



# MAIN CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

The following are the common challenges identified by the PlaceYour project consortium, which were frequently encountered during the process of establishing local networks. These challenges reflect recurring obstacles that emerged across different regions, highlighting the key barriers to effective collaboration and stakeholder engagement. Understanding these shared difficulties provides valuable insights into the complexities of network development and offers a foundation for refining strategies to enhance connectivity, participation, and long-term sustainability.







Additionally, **limited human and financial resources** dedicated to outreach is another frequent obstacle. Building and maintaining a network requires personnel serving as “linking managers” to coordinate actions, maintain regular communication with stakeholders, and ensure commitments are followed. Many VET institutions operate with tight budgets, making it difficult to allocate staff time to networking unless the return on investment is evident especially in terms of graduate employability. On the employer side, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), there may be insufficient staff or time to devote to activities outside their core business, hampering sustained involvement in committees or events.



Another recurring challenge is maintaining stakeholders’ long-term commitment once the network is established. After the initial enthusiasm of meetings or agreements, participation may decline if tangible results are not achieved quickly or if interactions are not effectively managed. Without effective communication, network members may lose their sense of belonging, feeling that the network does not provide value or that their feedback is unheeded. As the management of networks is complex and multifaceted, it often requires sophisticated facilitation and leadership to navigate these hurdles.



## NOTE

Each country reported common and specific challenges: in Spain, Greece, and Italy, while there is a push for dual vocational training, many companies (especially SMEs) are unsure how to integrate into these models or are afraid of the administrative burdens; in Brazil and Colombia, there are solid institutions (SENAI, SENA), but the challenge lies in coordinating the different regional efforts under a shared vision; in Mexico, the expansion of the dual model has faced the challenge of ensuring quality as thousands of companies join. Despite these differences, all cases underscore the importance of creating a structured method that guides institutions in identifying partners and keeping them actively involved for the benefit of students.



# SHARED RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the common challenges encountered during the establishment of local networks, the PlaceYour project partners developed a series of recommendations aimed at improving network formation, stakeholder engagement, and long-term sustainability. These recommendations were largely consistent across the participating countries, highlighting strategic actions that can enhance the effectiveness, inclusivity, and resilience of local networks, ensuring their positive impact on VET Institutions. These recommendations include:

## **Define clear objectives and communicate concrete benefits**

- Explain how the network will generate value for each participant (prestige, visibility, network expansion, training opportunities, etc.).
- Tailor the message to each type of stakeholder (businesses, VET, local governments).

## **Personalize communication and maintain ongoing contact**

- Send well-designed invitations and use multiple channels (email, calls, social media, virtual meetings).
- Maintain close follow-up so that stakeholders feel valued and understand their role.

## **Establish flexible participation mechanisms**

- Offer different modalities (virtual meetings, partial participation, flexible schedules).
- Recognize the time and resource constraints of each stakeholder.

## **Offer incentives and recognition.**

- Publicly acknowledge participants' contributions.
- Include them in other networks or projects, and provide access to tools, training, and documents.

## **Generate formal and informal collaboration opportunities**

- Combine workshops, focus groups, informational meetings, and informal networking opportunities.
- Systematically document all progress (standardized formats).

## **Monitor, evaluate, and constantly adjust.**

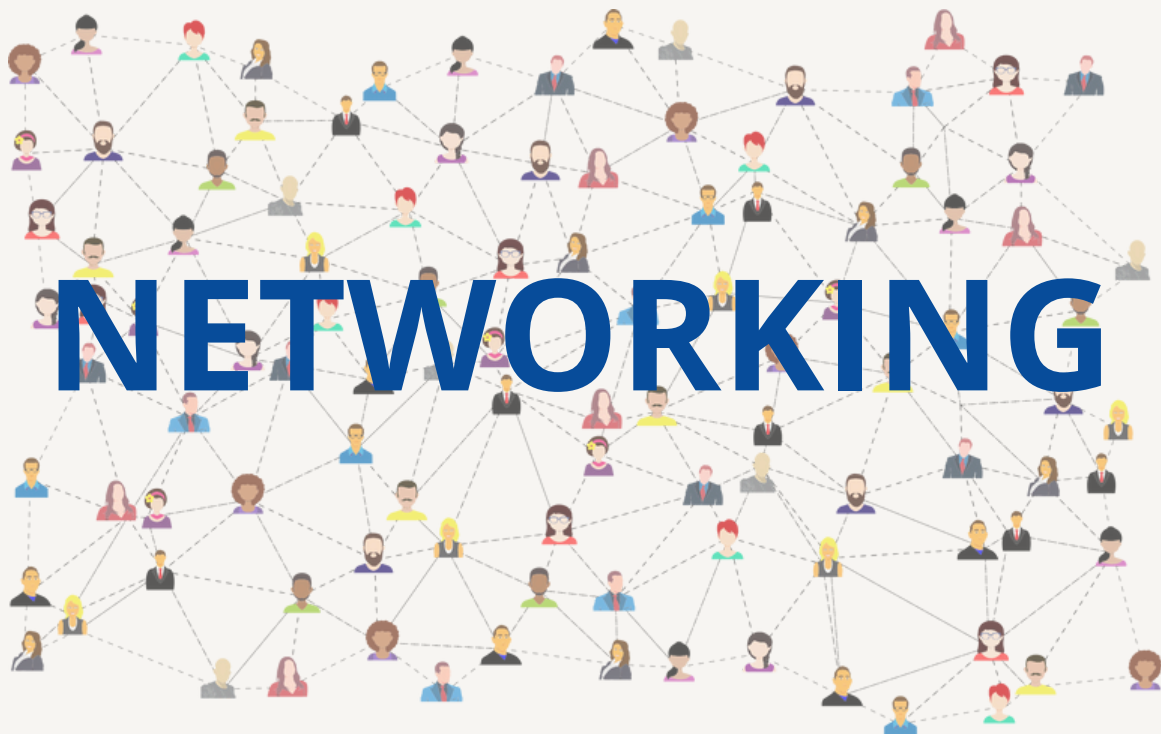
- Collect ongoing feedback from participants to improve the network (surveys, follow-up meetings).
- Adjust objectives, action plans, or approaches based on emerging needs.



# NETWORKING METHODOLOGY

Based on the documented experience of the PlaceYour project consortium (Italy, Greece, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, and Spain), this methodology consists of a series of structured steps and flexible strategies that any Vocational Education Training (VET) institutions can follow and adapt to its specific context. Designed to promote employability, strengthen industry partnerships, and foster inclusive and sustainable training models, this methodology provides a practical framework for establishing effective collaboration networks between educational institutions, businesses, government agencies, and local communities.

The methodology outlines concrete steps and practical recommendations to guide institutions on this path. Beyond theory, the true call is to action: for each VET center, regardless of size or location, to make the first moves toward creating its own collaborative network. This document aims to serve as a guide and motivation to structure those efforts, but the real impact will come from implementation and local adaptation. This is an invitation to educational leaders, instructors, business representatives, and authorities: make networking a daily practice in VET, so that every student gains not just a quality education, but also a network of opportunities connecting them to a promising career future.



# PHASE 1: INITIAL PLANNING AND STAKEHOLDERS MAPPING

## Objective

- To define the strategic foundation of the network by clarifying its purpose, identifying and segmenting relevant stakeholders, and designing tailored value propositions that align with local priorities and effectively communicate the benefits of participation.

## Key Activities

### a) Defining the VET network's purpose

- Determining the network's main purpose (e.g., strengthening vocational training in specific sector, creating bridges to job placement, etc.).
- Aligning it with local priorities (e.g., local economy, community needs, etc.).

### b) Mapping and segmenting stakeholders

- Identifying potential participants: VET institutions, SMEs, NGOs, authorities, chambers of commerce, etc.
- Categorizing by level of interest and influence (stakeholder map).

### c) Value proposition design

- Develop a message tailored to each stakeholder segment, clearly demonstrating the benefits (e.g., access to training, networking, institutional support).

## Checkpoints

- Clearly defined Network "Objectives and Values" document.
- Prioritized list of stakeholders with contact information.
- Alignment between network goals and regional/country priorities.



# a) Defining the VET network's purpose

## Why is it important?

- **Sense of direction:** Having a clear vision (the "why" of the network) helps everyone involved understand the intended goal.
- **Coherence and alignment:** It ensures that future actions are aligned with the defined goals (e.g., improving vocational training for different sectors, boosting youth employability, etc.).
- **Motivation and commitment:** When objectives are well-established, participants are inspired to collaborate, as they see value and relevance in the initiative.

## How to define the vision and objectives?

### 1. Context review

- Analyze local and/or regional needs related to VET education. What specific problems do you want to address? (skills shortages in a sector, disconnect between companies and training centers, etc.)
- Explore local trends that may influence vocational training.

### 2. Define the target population and scope.

- Will the focus be exclusively on vocational training institutions? Will companies in the sector be involved? What type of students, teachers, or workers do you want to impact?

### 3. Vision statement

- It should be concise, aspirational, and focused. For example: "Create a strong collaborative network that integrates the main players in the tourism and vocational training sectors, boosting employability and local economic development."



#### 4. SMART Objectives

- It is recommended that objectives be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound).
- Example: "Train 100 teachers and trainers from VET institutions in sustainable tourism within a 12-month period" or "Develop three joint projects between companies and VET institutions to implement place branding practices in the region before the end of the academic year."

#### 5. Validation and Initial Feedback

- Before finalizing the vision and objectives, it is recommended to gather input from key stakeholders (founding partners, advisors, institutional leaders), which helps generate greater legitimacy and a sense of ownership.



# b) Mapping and segmenting the stakeholders

## What is a stakeholder or key actor?

A stakeholder (or key actor) is any individual or organization that can be impacted by, benefit from, or significantly contribute to achieving the vision and objectives of the network. Their involvement can range from a one-time interest to active participation in decision-making or in the development of joint projects. Stakeholders can play various roles (resource providers, strategic allies, final beneficiaries, etc.). Below is a list of the main types of stakeholders:

**Vocational Education and Training Institutions:** Comprises VET centers, universities, specialized academies, and technical schools.

- They bring academic expertise, training infrastructure, specialized faculty, and often a direct channel to students.
- They can lead research projects, innovate in curricula, and facilitate labor market entry for graduates.

**Companies in the specific sector of the network:** Includes small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large corporations operating in the field related to the network.

- They offer internships, apprenticeships, employment opportunities, and collaboration in innovation projects.
- Their feedback on market needs is crucial to align the educational offering with real-world demand.

**Government authorities and public bodies:** May be city councils, ministries, departments of education and labor, tourism offices, among others.

- They formulate public policies, manage resources, and establish regulations that directly affect education and the sector's economic development.
- Their involvement is essential for the sustainability and scalability of the network's initiatives.



**Chambers and business associations:** Encompasses chambers of commerce, tourism associations, sector guilds, etc.

- Serves as a liaison between the network and the set of associated companies, facilitating the dissemination of initiatives and the recruitment of new allies.
- They can provide institutional support, create meeting spaces, and supply up-to-date sector information.

**Non-governmental organizations (NGOs):** Promote sustainability, local development, and improvement of vocational training, among other social objectives.

- They have experience in implementing community projects and are valuable partners for strengthening the social responsibility approach within the network.
- They can offer guidance and resources to incorporate equity, inclusion, and sustainability practices.

**Local communities and civil society groups:** Includes local residents, collectives, cultural associations, and other groups involved in the community development

- Their participation ensures that strategies are designed with a deep understanding of local realities, favoring acceptance and the relevance of projects.
- They contribute knowledge of the territory, traditions, social needs, and opportunities for community collaboration.



## How to map the key stakeholders?

A stakeholder map is a visual tool that lists and classifies the individuals, organizations, and institutions that have an interest in or could contribute to the network's purpose. It is recommended to form an internal team at the center that, using local data, identifies potential stakeholders and categorizes them according to their level of interest and influence.

### KEY STEPS

#### Initial Brainstorming

- Develop an extensive list of all potential stakeholders in the project.
- Include both close stakeholders and those who may seem more distant but have influence or interest.

#### Contact Prioritization

- Determine which stakeholders should be directly and immediately involved, who will be kept informed, and who could be monitored long-term.

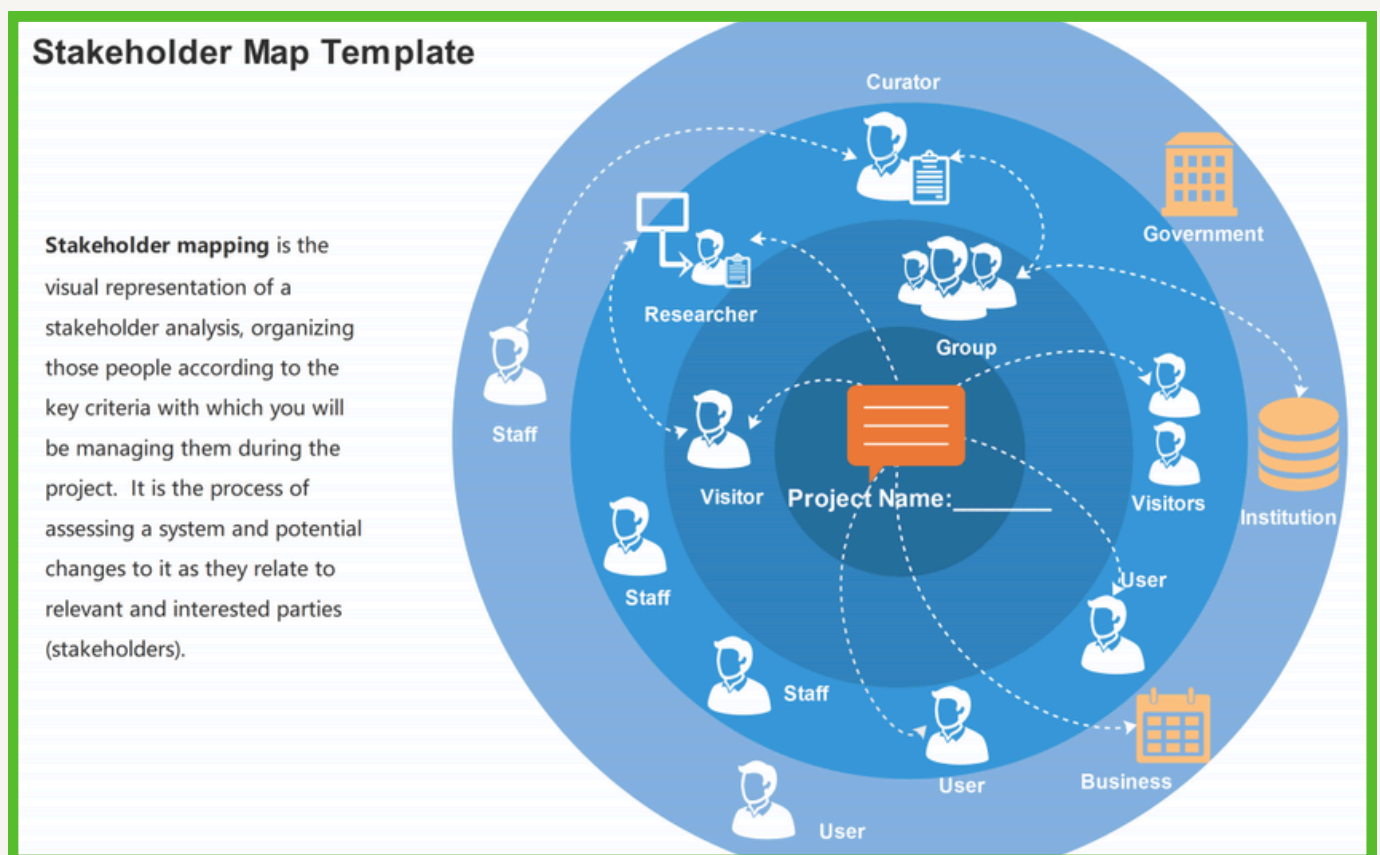
#### Classification by Interest and Influence

- Interest: The degree to which the stakeholder is affected or could be benefit by the network.
- Influence: The stakeholder's ability to influence decisions and outcomes (decision-making power, resources, recognized leadership, etc.).



The map organizes stakeholders based on their proximity to the center: at the core are those considered most strategic, while surrounding them, in concentric circles, are represented by gradual levels of importance or proximity. This analysis allows initial efforts to be focused on those with the greatest capacity for support or impact within the network.

The stakeholders map is not only useful at the beginning to identify stakeholders but can also be a living document to monitor and update the network's composition. It should be reviewed periodically (e.g., annually) to add emerging actors or track changes in relevance among existing ones. Visually, it can be updated in a graphic showing the VET center at the center, with the logos or names of partner entities arranged around it, categorized by type (business, public sector, etc.), possibly color-coded for level of involvement. This resource helps both internal (teachers, students) and external audiences easily see who is part of the alliance. The stakeholders map graphically reflects the connections among the different agents and their roles, allowing you to identify gaps (e.g., an absence of a major productive sector) at a glance.



## c) Value proposition design

When choosing which stakeholders to invite first, it is vital to consider the alignment of interests: What do they gain by participating? Do their goals (social responsibility, talent needs, etc.) align with the training mission? Ideally, you look for win-win relationships where each side sees value in collaborating. At this stage, a bit of research or exploratory contact can help gauge potential partners' willingness to get involved. It is not about recruiting the largest possible number of actors but rather those who truly match the vision of improving youth employability and are willing to commit time or resources. Starting with a small but committed group is often more effective than having a lengthy contact list with little real interaction.

For instance:

- **VET Institutions:** "Continuous improvement of their training offerings, opportunities for international projects, and teacher training."
- **Companies:** "Access to talent trained in specific skills, the opportunity to influence the training of the local workforce, and visibility as a socially responsible company."
- **Authorities:** "Boosting the region's economic and social development, strengthening employment and competitiveness programs."
- **Communities:** "Active participation in the design of community projects that promote their identity and directly benefit the local population."

### Complementary Recommendations

- **Collaborative Work:** Involve a small group of internal or external leaders who bring different perspectives (educational authorities, business representatives, sector experts, etc.) in defining the vision.
- **Focus on Effective Communication:** When mapping stakeholders, consider not only who they are, but also how and when to communicate with them (one-on-one meetings, briefings, personalized emails).
- **Flexibility and Periodic Review:** Both the vision and the stakeholders mapping are living documents; they should be updated if new opportunities arise, if regional priorities change, or if more relevant stakeholders emerge.
- **Document and Store Evidence:** This first phase usually sets the course for the project; It is important to record the initial meetings, decisions made, and justifications for the inclusion/prioritization of certain stakeholders.



# PHASE 2: OUTREACH AND STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGEMENT

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## Objective

- To generate awareness, interest, and early engagement among potential stakeholders through a well-structured communication plan, personalized outreach, and a clear presentation of the network's goals, structure, and value.

## Key Activities

### a) Developing a Communication Plan

- Includes key information (objectives, benefits, opportunities).

### b) Personal and Mass Outreach

- Sending formal invitations and using social media, newsletters, etc.
- One-on-one calls or meetings for key stakeholders.

### c) Presentation and Introductory Sessions

- Explain the network's objectives, structure, roles, benefits and responsibilities.

## Checkpoints

- Clearly defined Communication Plan outlining objectives, benefits, and key messages.
  - Comprehensive stakeholder outreach strategy, combining personal and mass communication channels.
  - Delivered Kick-Off Presentation or Workshop explaining network purpose, structure, roles, and participation benefits.
- 



# a) Developing a Communication Plan

## Why is it important?

A well-defined communication plan ensures that the core information (objectives, benefits, opportunities) is consistently conveyed to all involved parties. It also establishes appropriate routines and channels to start and maintain interest and participation.

### Key considerations when creating the plan

- **Communication objectives:** Are you aiming to inform, motivate, share achievements, or attract new participants? It is crucial to clarify the goal of each message.
- **Audience segmentation:** Not all stakeholders need the same information nor respond to the same channels. Define the target groups (companies, authorities, VET institutions, communities, etc.) and adapt both the message and frequency.
- **Communication channels:** Emails, social media, newsletters, phone calls, virtual or in-person meetings, etc. Evaluate what each stakeholder prefers and has available.
- **Frequency:** Determine how often updates will be sent out or meetings will be held (e.g., a monthly newsletter, quarterly meetings, special announcements).
- **Responsibilities:** Specify who will prepare and send messages, track responses, and assess the effectiveness of the communication efforts.
- **Evaluation indicators:** Establish ways to measure success (e.g., email open rate, number of meeting attendees, positive feedback) and adjust the plan accordingly.
- **Expected result:** A reference document or guide detailing the content and communication strategy, aligned with the network's overarching objectives and the characteristics of its members.



## b) Personal and Mass Outreach

### **Sending Formal Invitations and Using Social Media, Newsletters, etc.**

- **Formal invitations:** Letters or emails with a professional tone that present the initiative, its purpose, and the benefits of participation. These build credibility and demonstrate seriousness.
- **Social media and newsletters:** Ideal for disseminating announcements quickly and widely, particularly to a broad or diverse audience. They also allow regular updates about news, events, and achievements.
- **Clear and engaging messages:** Use concise language tailored to the audience, highlighting the value for the recipient if they join (possible collaborations, access to resources, visibility, etc.).



### **Personalized Calls or Meetings for Key Stakeholders**

- **Individualized approach:** Some stakeholders with high influence or relevance (local authorities, business executives, etc.) require direct communication to strengthen the relationship and convey the importance of their involvement.
- **Opportunity for dialogue:** Meetings (in person or online) provide a chance to clarify specific questions, discuss expectations, and explore possible synergies for each stakeholder.
- **Building trust:** One-on-one contact fosters closeness and professionalism, facilitates negotiation of commitments, and encourages long-term collaboration.



# c) Presentation and Introductory Sessions

## How to develop an introductory session?

### 1. Setting the Stage: Context and Vision

Begin by painting a clear picture of the network's overarching purpose. Share the vision behind why it was formed. Perhaps it addresses a gap in vocational education, targets a rising industry need, or aims to bring together scattered efforts in one coherent strategy. Outlining the core challenges or opportunities the network seeks to tackle provides a common focus for everyone in the room. This part of the session helps participants understand the "why" behind the initiative and inspires them to see the role they could play in creating meaningful change.

### 2. How it all fits together: the Organizational Structure

Next, introduce the network's framework so the attendees can see how their involvement will fit into the bigger puzzle. This could include explaining different committees or working groups, and naming key coordinators or leaders for each area. By showing precisely how decisions will be made, tasks assigned, and information shared, you offer participants clarity on how to engage in ways that suit their interests and expertise. It also reassures them that the network has a solid foundation and a plan for long-term collaboration.

### 3. Defining Duties and Mutual Benefits: Roles and Responsibilities

One of the questions most participants will have is: "What am I expected to do, and what do I get out of this?". To address this, outline the specific commitments being asked of them. Maybe it's attending meetings periodically, offering practical support, or mentoring students. At the same time, be sure to emphasize the support they will receive in return, such as access to professional resources, specialized training, networking opportunities, or greater visibility. Being transparent about both sides of this exchange helps participants see the tangible benefits of their involvement.

### 4. Tools for Success: Work Methodology

Conclude this session by describing how everyone will collaborate on a day-to-day basis. Highlight any collaborative platforms you plan to use. Perhaps a shared online workspace for document exchange or a project management system for scheduling. Likewise, clarify how often the group will meet (monthly, quarterly, etc.) so participants can plan their schedules accordingly. Giving an overview of these practical logistics grounds the big vision in actionable steps and helps create an immediate sense of momentum.



# PHASE 3: RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND COLLABORATION

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## Objective

- To establish trust-based relationships with strategically selected stakeholders by formalizing roles and responsibilities and offering flexible participation models that ensure long-term engagement, inclusivity, and shared ownership of the network's development.

## Key Activities

### a) Stakeholder Selection

- Evaluate the level of interest, commitment, and potential contribution of each stakeholder identified in the mapping phase and the results of the initial involvement.

### a) Design flexible participation models

- Create different levels of engagement to accommodate stakeholder diversity.
- Offer thematic or modular participation options to allow stakeholders to engage based on interest and capacity.
- Include a mix of in-person and virtual formats to facilitate the accessibility.

### b) Participation Agreements

- Invite the selected stakeholders to formalize their involvement through participation agreements.

## Checkpoints

- Finalized list of selected stakeholders with documented evaluation criteria.
  - Signed participation agreements or MOUs with key institutions and strategic partners.
  - Documented flexible participation model outlining levels of engagement.
- 



# a) Stakeholders Selection

Once the initial outreach and awareness activities have been completed, the next essential step is to establish strong, trust-based relationships with selected stakeholders and lay the groundwork for effective, long-term collaboration. At the heart of building meaningful relationships is **the strategic selection of the stakeholders**. Not all contacts will be equally relevant or engaged, so it is necessary to assess each based on:

## a) Level of Interest:

- Has the stakeholder responded positively to the initial outreach?
- Have they shown curiosity, enthusiasm, or proactive behavior (e.g., asking questions, suggesting ideas)?
- Did they attend information sessions or follow-up on invitations?

## b) Commitment Potential:

- Are they willing to actively participate in upcoming activities (e.g., meetings, working groups, dissemination)?
- Do they have available time and human resources to dedicate to the project?
- Have they demonstrated past commitment in similar collaborative initiatives?

## c) Capacity to Contribute:

- Do they have specific expertise, resources, or networks that are relevant to the project's goals?
- Can they offer technical knowledge, infrastructure, training spaces, funding, or access to local communities or target groups?
- Are they in a position of influence (e.g., public institutions, industry leaders, umbrella organizations)?

## d) Strategic Alignment:

- Does their mission or institutional focus align with the thematic priorities of the project (e.g., circular economy, sustainable tourism, community development)?
- Do they share similar values and objectives related to inclusion, innovation, and social impact?
- Can they serve as amplifiers or multipliers of the project's messages and values?



# b) Designing flexible participation models

## 1. Flexibility as a Key to Participation

- The success of a network depends on offering flexible participation options that reflect the varying capacities, interests, and availability of its members.
- Not all stakeholders can engage at the same frequency or intensity, so adaptable models prevent burnout and increase inclusivity.

## 2. Creating Different Levels of Involvement

- The network should define multiple roles or levels of engagement:
  - Core members: Actively involved in governance, attending regular meetings, and influencing strategic decisions (e.g., advisory boards).
  - Peripheral members or collaborators: Participate in selected activities (e.g., offering internships, attending events) without ongoing responsibilities.
- This allows the stakeholders with limited resources (e.g., small businesses) to contribute meaningfully without full-time engagement.

## 3. Designing Modular and Thematic Opportunities

- The network can develop modular initiatives or working groups around specific themes (e.g., technology, entrepreneurship, inclusion).
- Stakeholders can join the modules that best match their expertise or interest, increasing both relevance and impact.
- This approach encourages targeted contributions and respects participants' time and focus.



#### 4. Flexible Formats and Time Commitments

- To support participation, the network should combine in-person and virtual formats, accommodating different schedules and geographic locations. Examples include:
  - Quarterly webinars or updates for general engagement.
  - Annual in-person gatherings to build stronger bonds.
  - Email or asynchronous input for stakeholders who cannot attend real-time meetings.
  - Creating online discussion spaces (e.g., WhatsApp, LinkedIn groups) helps keep less active members informed and involved.

#### 5. Adaptive Network Governance

- The network should evolve with its members. Initial governance can be informal and flexible, gradually moving toward more structured arrangements (e.g., collaboration agreements or sector councils) as participation deepens.
- Allowing stakeholders to enter at their own pace and grow into more active roles ensures organic and sustained engagement.

#### 5. Recognizing Contextual Diversity

- Each stakeholder comes from a unique context, sectoral, institutional, geographic, which must be respected.
- Avoid a “one-size-fits-all” model. Instead, offer personalized pathways for participation that align with each actor’s capacity and interests.



The consortium partners of the PlaceYour project, across Italy, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Spain and Greece, arrived at a crucial, shared insight: flexibility in participation models is a decisive factor for the success and sustainability of local stakeholder networks. This conclusion did not stem from theory alone, but from first-hand experience in building diverse networks involving actors with varying levels of availability, resources, and interests.

The experience clearly showed that rigid collaboration models tend to limit stakeholder engagement, while flexible approaches empower participants to contribute according to their capacities. The PlaceYour consortium validated flexibility as a best practice, supported by the practical results on the ground. Designing open and adaptive networks, where roles and engagement levels can evolve, helps build resilience and responsiveness in the face of both internal shifts and external challenges.



# c) Participation Agreement

A participation agreement is a key step in formalizing the relationship between network members and laying the foundation for collaboration. These agreements can take different forms, from a verbal commitment to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or a collaboration agreement. The most relevant aspects are discussed below:

## Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

### Objective and Scope

- The document specifies the network's overall goals, aligning the parties involved in the same direction. The activities that are included in the agreement and those that are not are detailed. This avoids misunderstandings about responsibilities or expectations.

### Roles and Responsibilities

- The agreement should indicate what is expected of each institution or participant (e.g., attendance at meetings, financial or in-kind contributions, provision of human resources, etc.). Although formal sanctions are not always necessary, it is advisable to specify procedures in case of noncompliance or failure to follow through on commitments.

### Duration and Renewal

- Establish the duration of the agreement (semiannual, annual, or multi-year) and whether it can be renewed automatically or through renegotiation. Indicate the reasons why either party could terminate their participation before the deadline.

### Mutual Benefits and Confidentiality Conditions

- Clearly express how the signatory institutions will benefit (access to resources, visibility, networking opportunities, etc.). If sensitive data or preliminary research will be shared, the MOU should include confidentiality and intellectual property clauses.

### Formality and Legitimacy

- Although not always a binding contract, the MOU does have symbolic weight and sometimes legal effects, depending on the local legal framework. Signing the document reinforces confidence in the project, demonstrating to third parties (collaborators, funders, the community) that the network has institutional support.



# PHASE 4: SUSTAINED PARTICIPATION AND LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

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## Objective

- To ensure long-term stakeholders' involvement by implementing strategies that foster ongoing collaboration, build trust, and strengthen participants' sense of ownership, thereby supporting the continuity, growth, and sustainability of the network.

## Key Activities

### a) Strategies for Ongoing Collaboration

- Maintain regular communication
- Use collaborative tools
- Monitor performance through periodic evaluations

### b) Deepening Stakeholder Engagement

- Invite partners to participate in decision-making
- Build trust through informal gatherings and peer-to-peer communication
- Recognize publicly stakeholder contributions
- Promote shared success stories

## Checkpoints

- Clearly defined system for ongoing communication
  - Operational collaborative tools and tracking systems
  - Functioning participatory governance structure
  - Implemented recognition and visibility strategy
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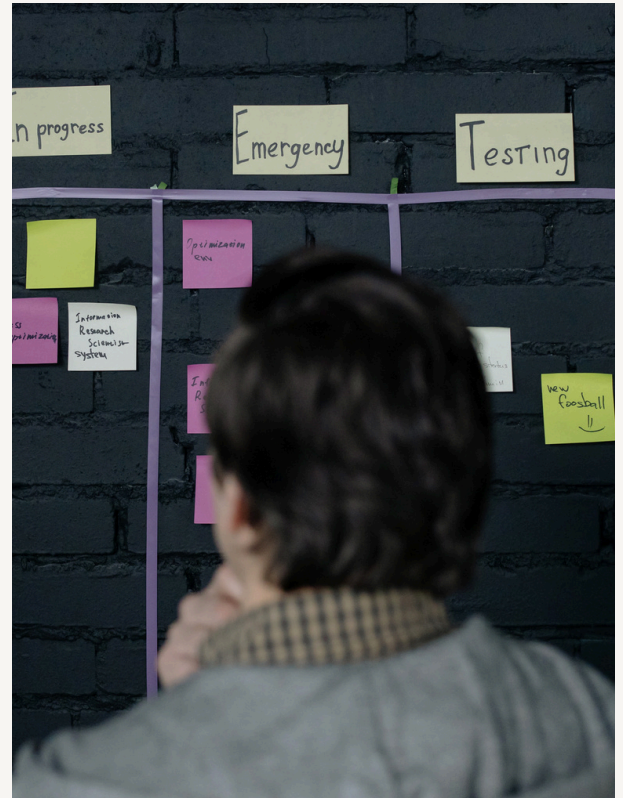


# a) Strategies for Ongoing Collaboration

## Professional facilitation

Having active and professional coordination for the network is critical. A facilitator or coordinating team with network management skills can keep the group together, mediate conflicts, ensure inclusive participation, and continuously gather feedback. As mentioned previously, networks often require “sophisticated facilitation and management” to deal with complexity.

This coordinator serves as the focal point for all members, offering personalized follow-up to less active partners to re-engage them, and celebrating collective milestones. Such servant leadership nurtures a sense of belonging, as members perceive there is someone looking out for the community’s well-being.



## Ongoing Communication and Engagement

Establishing consistent and transparent communication is essential for maintaining stakeholder interest and building long-term relationships. Regular updates via newsletters, bulletins, or virtual check-ins keep members informed about ongoing and upcoming activities, achievements, and opportunities to get involved.

Equally important is creating open channels for two-way communication, where stakeholders can ask questions, share ideas, and provide feedback.



## Use of Collaborative Tools and Performance Tracking

- Shared timelines: Online calendars that list events, deadlines, and important activities, helping stakeholders plan ahead and coordinate.
- Collaborative platforms: Secure web portals or intranet spaces where documents, meeting notes, and opportunities (e.g., internships, events) can be posted and accessed by members. These platforms can also host discussion forums to encourage peer interaction.
- Tracking systems: Use of simple CRM tools or shared spreadsheets to monitor stakeholder participation, track signed agreements, record interactions, and manage key milestones.



## Monitoring and Feedback Mechanisms

To ensure that the network remains responsive and relevant, it is important to regularly collect feedback from stakeholders. This can be done through surveys, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, or quick feedback forms after major events or activities.

The insights gathered should inform continuous improvement, helping to refine roles, adjust engagement strategies, and align activities more closely with stakeholders' evolving needs. It also demonstrates a commitment to listening and adapting, which strengthens trust and participation.



## b) Methods for deep Stakeholders Engagement

Once stakeholders have joined, the challenge is cultivating a community in which each member feels valued, heard, and motivated to keep contributing. Several methods can support this objective:

- **Participatory governance:** Invite partners to take part in decision-making and planning for the network itself. For instance, rotate meeting locations among member companies or institutions, or allow them to chair specific committees. When stakeholders have a voice and vote in network initiatives, they develop a stronger sense of ownership. One model is to establish an advisory board with representatives from different sectors (a large company, an SME, government, alumni, etc.) to jointly direct activities. This reduces any perception that the network “belongs only to the school,” transitioning it into a collective effort.
- **Building trust and personal relationships:** Networks become stronger when connections go beyond formal agreements. Encouraging more informal gatherings (like an annual breakfast to say thanks, teacher visits to companies, social events) helps participants get to know one another personally. Trust grows over time, as participants keep their promises (for example, if a company offers five internship slots and the school sends well-prepared candidates, both sides fulfill their commitments). Each small shared success strengthens the bond. Creating direct communication channels among peers, for instance, a VET school liaison with an HR manager at Company X for quick follow-up, reinforces mutual commitment.
- **Recognition and visibility:** Publicly and privately acknowledging stakeholders’ contributions is powerful. This may involve awards or annual recognition (e.g., “Partner of the Year”), mentions on social media or in local press, highlighting collaboration success stories, and handing out plaques or certificates. Showcasing what partner organizations do (e.g., a news article on a volunteering mentorship program for students at a company) not only expresses gratitude but also enhances their reputation. Many stakeholders appreciate the reputation boost of being seen as supporting education and youth initiatives. When a company sees its logo associated with impactful social projects, it bolsters its pride in being part of the network.



- **Shared sense of purpose:** It's essential to continually reinforce the network's shared vision and goals. Reminding everyone of the "why" of collaboration, e.g., "improving the employability of young people in our community and contributing to local economic development", helps renew commitment. Some successful networks begin their meetings by presenting a student success story or key impact data (e.g., numbers of new hires or internships) to directly link daily tasks to a higher cause. Focusing on measurable results and human interest stories inspires intrinsic motivation among participants.
- **Planning for Growth and Sustainability:** For the network to remain dynamic and impactful, there must be a clear plan for scaling and renewal. This includes the progressive integration of new stakeholders through a structured and inclusive onboarding process, ensuring newcomers feel welcomed and informed. At the same time, existing members should be engaged in co-creating future initiatives, such as proposing new projects, suggesting strategic partnerships, or contributing to funding proposals. Identifying diverse funding sources (e.g., grants, private sponsorships, public support) and aligning with local or regional policy priorities will help ensure the long-term viability of the network.



# RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Based on common patterns identified in the findings from the six countries, here are some recommendations for VET centers to strengthen their networking processes and adapt them to future needs:

- **Institutional Commitment and Leadership:** The leadership of the VET center should be firmly committed to the networking strategy. Appoint a person or team responsible for outreach, allocate resources (staff time, a budget for network-related activities), and make collaboration a priority in the institution's strategic plan. Leadership must lead by example, actively participating in stakeholder events and promoting an internal culture of collaboration.
- **Clarity of Roles and Expectations:** From the outset, define clear roles for network participants (e.g., who are strategic allies versus occasional collaborators) and communicate mutual expectations. When each actor understands their role and contributions, the network functions more effectively. Simple documents such as terms of reference or letters of engagement can be helpful. This includes clarifying responsibilities within the VET center itself (who manages corporate contacts, who organizes events, etc.) so that nothing is overlooked.
- **Focus on Training Relevance and Quality:** Ensure collaboration with industry is reflected in the constant updating of the curriculum and training practices. Encourage employers to co-create educational content, assess students' competencies, and provide feedback on hired graduates. This maintains the value proposition for companies (skilled talent) and for students (training aligned with real-world needs). Experts underscore that working side by side with industry stakeholders ensures VET curricula remain relevant and adaptable to market demands.
- **Continuous Flexibility and Adaptation:** Implement a continuous improvement process for the network. Conduct periodic (annual) evaluations with stakeholders to gather suggestions, identify what works and what doesn't, and make necessary adjustments. Keep the network flexible so that new players (e.g., local startup companies) can join and so that forms of interaction can change as conditions evolve (e.g., greater reliance on virtual platforms if in-person meetings become difficult). Experiences worldwide demonstrate there is no single perfect model; successful networks reinvent and adapt themselves to the local context. It's therefore wise not to cling too rigidly to the initial plan if feedback indicates the need to pivot.



- **Support from Public Policy and External Partnerships:** Seek assistance from government agencies or programs that can strengthen the network. This could include leveraging calls for funding or initiatives from national and international organizations dedicated to boosting youth employment. For instance, the European Union, development banks, or labor ministries often have programs promoting education–industry linkage; aligning with them may bring resources and higher visibility. Additionally, connecting with broader networks (e.g., UNESCO–UNEVOC, sector organizations, chambers of commerce) broadens the network’s influence. Looking to the future, lobbying for more favorable legal frameworks (e.g., tax incentives for training companies, mandatory sector councils for VET) would be beneficial, following successful examples like the Colombian apprenticeship quota or Mexico’s state support for dual VET.
- **Showcasing Results and Success Stories:** As part of continuous improvement, invest in documenting and disseminating the network’s achievements. Keep track of employment outcomes, spotlight stories of students who found jobs thanks to the network, collect company testimonials, and publish these in reports or newsletters. This not only reaffirms existing members’ engagement (seeing the impact of their efforts) but also attracts new stakeholders and prospective students who want to join a VET program with proven effectiveness. Sharing these results in conferences, local news outlets, or educational forums raises the VET center’s profile as a networking leader, generating a positive multiplier effect.

In summary, these recommendations aim to institutionalize networking as an integral part of VET management, providing it with structure, support, and relevance. Looking ahead, it will also be vital to consider trends such as the digitalization of networking (online talent–company matching platforms), the internationalization of networks (exchanges with foreign institutions), and incorporating broader social aims (alliances for green or digital economy skills aligned with new global demands). Adapting to these changes, while staying focused on employability and mutual benefits, will ensure that networks remain an effective mechanism for VET to fulfill its mission in the 21st century.



# SUCCESS STORIES AND CONCRETE EXAMPLES

Here are success stories and best practices identified in Italy, Greece, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia where VET networking has contributed to improving student employability:



Spain (Alliance for Dual VET): In Spain, one standout example is the Alliance for Dual Vocational Education and Training, a nationwide network led by the Bertelsmann Foundation. It includes over 1,500 members (companies, educational centers, local government offices, and institutions) all committed to improving youth employability through high-quality Dual VET.

This alliance acts as a networking platform, allowing VET centers and businesses to share standards, receive support, and spread best practices for dual training. Thousands of students have gained firsthand work experience before graduating. For instance, the Basque Country and Catalonia have both reported significant increases in job placement among apprentices trained under the Alliance's agreements.

A central element of success has been having a coordinator that offers flexible forms of participation for companies (ranging from guest speaking at institutes to becoming an official training business) along with public recognition for engaged companies. This generates a virtuous cycle: more and more employers join when they see how well-prepared dual graduates are, and schools adopt dual training backed by the network.

RED MORE AT: <https://www.alianzafpdual.es/alianza/que-es/>





Brazil (SENAI's Industry-Training Collaboration Model): Brazil has the Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial (SENAI), a leading example of structured engagement with industry. Created in 1942 by the business sector itself, SENAI functions as the educational arm of the National Confederation of Industry.

Today it spans a huge network of over 1,000 training centers across around 2,700 Brazilian municipalities, closely tied to businesses in 28 industrial sectors. SENAI's model includes sectoral technical committees where entrepreneurs and teachers jointly define job profiles, curricula, and competency standards, ensuring continuous alignment of training with production needs, resulting in high employability rates.

In the automotive industry, for example, SENAI São Paulo worked with major auto manufacturers to modernize labs and implement dual training programs, enabling most apprentices to be hired by those same companies. Brazil's experience demonstrates how a formal network structure (industry-VET institutions under shared governance) can scale and stay relevant with steady sector funding, constantly adapting to technological changes.

**RED MORE AT: <https://www.sp.senai.br/o-senai/o-sistema-senai>**





Mexico (Mexican Dual Training Model and CONALEP Partnerships): In recent years, Mexico has vigorously promoted dual education at upper-secondary levels. The Mexican Dual Training Model (MMFD), adapted with German support, has signed agreements between technical schools and businesses in several states. A success metric: currently, over 3,279 companies participate, hosting 16,240 students from technological high schools who rotate between classroom study and real-work environments.

This rapid scaling occurred thanks to coordination by the Ministry of Public Education, which acts as network facilitator, and institutions like CONALEP (National College of Professional Technical Education), which specialize in dual training and serve as a bridge to industry. An example is in Querétaro, where the aerospace sector, key in that region, joined the dual model: companies like Airbus and Safran opened their doors to VET industrial students, training them under joint supervision from school tutors and on-site instructors.

Many of those young people secured jobs upon graduating, while the companies have cultivated suitably skilled employees. Mexico's experience underlines the importance of government support and policy frameworks (guidelines from SEP) in reinforcing networks, plus the value of showcasing results (employed graduates) to build trust among more employers.





Colombia (SENA and Mandatory Apprentice Quotas): Colombia presents an interesting case in which partnerships are institutionalized by law. The Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA), founded in 1957 through a collective effort of workers, employers, the Church, and the government, is a public entity offering free technical and technological training closely linked to the productive sector. One of the strengths of the Colombian model is the mandatory apprentice quota: by law, all companies with 15 or more employees must take on apprentices from training programs (commonly SENNA) or contribute financially instead.

This has produced a massive collaborative ecosystem: thousands of companies host SENNA apprentices annually, integrating them into real work processes. While compliance is legally required, many businesses go beyond the minimum, forming deeper alliances with SENNA, co-designing specialized programs and investing in training centers region-wide. One success story is the construction sector's apprentice program: large builders have trained a generation of site managers through hands-on rotations, to the point that SENNA and the Camacol trade association jointly opened a dedicated training center.

The outcome has been better-qualified labor for companies and more stable jobs for graduates. Colombia's example demonstrates that by combining public policy incentives with relationship-building (many firms see SENNA as a strategic partner for workforce development), a strong nationwide network of businesses, educational centers, and government can be consolidated for sustainable employability.





In Italy, a prominent example of structured collaboration between the productive sector and technical education is the Dual System, initially launched as a pilot project in 2015 and later supported by national policies. Under this model, companies and training centers share responsibility for educating young people by combining classroom instruction with hands-on experience in the workplace. The initiative is closely linked to apprenticeship programs (apprendistato) and the “Alternanza Scuola-Lavoro” (ASL) strategy, which requires upper-secondary students to complete a minimum number of hours in real work environments.

Another cornerstone of the Italian approach is the network of Istituti Tecnici Superiori (ITS)—non-university tertiary-level institutions that focus on high-demand technological sectors (such as mechatronics, agri-food, tourism, fashion, or Industry 4.0). Each ITS operates as a foundation involving companies, business associations, regional authorities, and educational institutions. This governance model ensures that curricula are constantly aligned with local and national production needs. In industrial regions like Lombardy or Piedmont, companies from the automotive and heavy machinery sectors actively participate in defining training content and providing updated labs and equipment. The effectiveness of this model is reflected in the high employability rates of ITS graduates—often exceeding 80%. Italy’s experience demonstrates how a solid legal framework, regional coordination, and direct employer involvement can establish a scalable and high-quality dual training system.





In Greece, dual vocational training and engagement with companies have gained momentum over the past decade, partly driven by EU-funded programs. A central player is the Manpower Employment Organization (OAED), which operates a network of Apprenticeship Schools (EPAS OAED). These schools combine theoretical instruction with practical training in companies, allowing students to work a few days a week under joint supervision by school tutors and company mentors. OAED facilitates sectoral agreements with employers who need specialized personnel, supporting the smooth transition of students into the labor market.

At the policy level, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and the General Secretariat for Vocational Education and Training have promoted reforms to strengthen VET and encourage collaborative networks with the private sector, particularly in strategic industries such as tourism, hospitality, and maritime transport. A notable example is the cooperation with major hotel chains, which offer practical rotations to students from tourism-related technical schools, providing hands-on experience with real infrastructure and customers. Similarly, in the maritime industry, shipping companies partner with maritime academies to train officers and crew members with up-to-date skills, helping maintain a competitive national fleet. Greece's example illustrates how, even in economically challenging contexts, a strong coordinating body (OAED) and sectoral alliances can sustain and expand dual training programs, supported by policy frameworks and driven by the demand for skilled labor in key economic sectors.



# FINAL CONCLUSIONS FROM THE PLACEYOUR PROJECT CONSORTIUM

The PlaceYour project consortium, comprising partners from Italy, Spain, Greece, Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia, concludes that establishing and sustaining effective stakeholder networks is not only essential for increasing the employability of VET learners, but also for fostering innovation and systemic change in vocational education. The insights gathered across diverse regional contexts reinforce several

key conclusions:

- **Networking is a Strategic Necessity for VET Excellence**

Collaboration between VET institutions and stakeholders from the labor market, government, and civil society significantly enhances the relevance, quality, and impact of vocational training. Effective networks help bridge the gap between education and employment by aligning curricula with real-world needs and offering practical learning opportunities through internships, apprenticeships, and joint projects.

- **A Flexible, Context-Aware Approach is Crucial**

The consortium identified flexibility as a cornerstone of successful network models. Each region has its own economic, institutional, and cultural specificities. Therefore, rigid models often fail to generate long-term engagement. Adaptable structures that allow stakeholders to participate at different levels and evolve over time were found to be much more effective and sustainable.

- **Early Clarity and Communication Drive Engagement**

Stakeholder participation is greatly improved when the network's objectives, benefits, and roles are clearly communicated from the outset. A strong initial outreach phase, supported by personalized communication and well-structured presentations, lays the foundation for trust and long-term commitment.



- **Institutional Commitment and Professional Facilitation Are Key**

Networks thrive when they are supported by committed institutions and guided by professional facilitators. Having a dedicated coordinator to manage relationships, follow up with less active members, and mediate expectations ensures continuity, coordination, and inclusivity within the network.

- **Long-Term Success Depends on Shared Ownership and Recognition**

Networks are most resilient when stakeholders feel a sense of ownership. Involving members in governance, decision-making, and co-creation of initiatives builds commitment. Recognizing and celebrating contributions—both privately and publicly—strengthens ties and inspires ongoing participation.

## **6. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Adaptation Foster Sustainability**

Continuous feedback loops and simple tracking systems (e.g., stakeholder CRMs, shared calendars, or dashboards) are vital for managing participation, identifying needs, and adjusting strategies. Regular reflection on performance metrics, combined with stakeholder input, enables networks to stay relevant and grow over time.

- **The Methodology is Transferable and Scalable**

Though designed through local experiences in tourism and vocational education, the methodology developed by PlaceYour is applicable to a wide range of sectors. Its structured but adaptable nature makes it suitable for replication in other VET contexts, both in Europe and Latin America.





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