

Good practice example: The Czech Republic supports European Cluster Excellence Initiative

Only a small number of Czech clusters proudly received a Cluster Management Excellence label yet.

The Cluster Management Excellence label is perceived as an essential tool helping cluster organisations in their development and enabling them to establish international cooperation. The individual areas of the benchmarking questionnaire indicate to the cluster management what they are good at and where they should need improvement. Furthermore, the possession of the mark of excellence demonstrates the quality of its holder, who is, therefore, more frequently invited to international projects.



The National Cluster Association (NCA) of the Czech Republic brings together over thirty of the most progressive Czech cluster organisation, defend their needs, and develops cluster policy. In 2020, the association introduced “profiles of cluster organisations” within the **Cluster Map of the Czech Republic**. The structured questionnaire is based on its know-how and the best practice examples from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform, European Cluster Excellence Initiative, and documents that cluster organisations prepare for grant applications to support their development.

Throughout the year 2021, NCA collected and assessed data from all members of the National Cluster Association. The NCA thus has comprehensive **Profiles of Cluster Organisations**, including detailed information on their activities and achievements, including the membership base of individual cluster organisations, i.e. companies and research institutions.

The profiles are extensive, assessing information on the involvement of cluster organisations in national and international projects, information on their foreign partners, details concerning international events participation, activities of expert working groups, and more.

By preparing the profile information, the members learned to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and to provide information about their activities in a structured way. **This prepared them for the entire benchmarking process of the European Cluster Excellence Initiative for the Bronze Label of Cluster Management Excellence application.**

Since 2007, cluster organisations have been using the Cooperation-Cluster subsidy programme within the framework of operational programmes financed by the European Regional Development Fund. The programme helps them to co-finance cluster development, collective research and the acquisition of shared infrastructure for industrial research. It allows them to focus on growth and innovation to increase SMEs’ research and innovation capacity and introduce innovative solutions and advanced technologies.

The new call Cooperation-Cluster under the Operational Programme Technology and Applications for Competitiveness (OPTAC) for 2021 - 2027 was launched on 16 January 2023. This Call **includes a condition for the cluster organisations to have a valid Label of Excellence** for projects focused on collective research and the acquisition of shared infrastructure. **It also included a condition for all applicants to obtain a higher Label of Excellence** (if the cluster currently has a bronze or silver label or renewal to the existing gold label). By this, **The Ministry of Industry and Trade**, the guarantor of OPTAK, **confirmed the importance of the excellence label**, demonstrating the cluster organisations’ quality. The NCA is currently taking steps to train two experts from the Czech Republic who will guide the applicants on the way to the Bronze Label.

There is also another new requirement for applicants. Cluster organisations **must** complete and validate their **Profile maintained by the National Cluster Association** and the profile on the ECCP. The Czech subsidy programmes are subject to the same condition as has been usual for several years for European programmes aimed at supporting cluster organisations.

In the Czech Republic, a complex system has been established that links subsidy support with the demonstration of the quality of support beneficiaries using a proven methodology used within the EU - both within the European Cluster Excellence Initiative and the National Cluster Association “Profiles” and the European Cluster Collaboration Platform.