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# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

SERBIA



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## INTRODUCTION

The VI4IS (Virtual Internships for Inclusive Societies) project is dedicated to enhancing the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of virtual internships across Europe. As part of this initiative, we aim to develop policy recommendations to support the implementation and improvement of virtual internships on both national and EU levels.

This document provides insights and recommendations from Serbia based on data gathered through various activities and sources, including:

- Evidence collected from virtual internships conducted during the project.
- Data from the Best Practices Report.
- National dialogues hosted in our country.
- Study visits to various institutions and organizations.

By contributing to this comprehensive policy framework, we seek to address the challenges and opportunities associated with virtual internships. Our goal is to foster new forms of cooperation, leverage best practices, and ultimately create a more inclusive and effective system for virtual internships that benefits students, educational institutions, and employers alike.

The following sections detail our findings and recommendations, which we believe will provide valuable insights for improving virtual internships and enhancing youth employability across Europe.

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## Section 1: Virtual Internships Evidence

### 1. Summary of Internship Data:

The virtual internship program in Serbia was implemented by the Belgrade Open School. The project team created and organized the fully virtual internship program "Career Guidance and Counseling for Young People" intended for high school students who want to create and implement various career guidance activities together with their teachers and professional associates in schools. The internship program gathered 42 participants from four cities in Serbia (Bac, Stara Pazova, Kragujevac, and Velika Plana). The selection process was focused on high schools with which BOS has established cooperation, i.e. vocational high schools, that have a large number of students, especially students from marginalized social groups. The program of virtual internship lasted 6 weeks, with following topics:

- First week: What is career guidance and counseling and why do we need it?
- Second week: How do we manage our careers and what skills do we need for that?
- Third week: Career guidance and young people – career information as the key to a good decision
- Fourth week: Who are career practitioners and how do you become a career practitioner?
- Fifth week: Career guidance activities in practice - preparation of implementation activities of career guidance
- Sixth week: Evaluation of the internship program

The aim of the internship program was to allow high school students to develop basic competencies for active participation in development of non-formal school activities related to career guidance and counselling activities.

The 80% of the participants successfully finished the internship program with 100% of completed tasks. The project team has organized the in-person evaluation process, in which they involved the participants of the program and school staff who supported the process.

### Success Stories:

As an integral component of the internship program, students from Secondary School Kragujevac took the initiative to design and implement peer workshops. These workshops were specifically crafted for their fellow students who had not participated in the virtual internship program. The content of these workshops closely mirrored the material covered during the virtual internship, thereby serving as a practical demonstration of the knowledge and skills the participating students had gained.

The workshops were meticulously tailored to benefit final-year students who were preparing to enter the job market. They included comprehensive sessions on crafting effective CVs and engaging in simulated job interviews. This hands-on approach not only helped the final-year students enhance their job-seeking skills but also allowed the workshop creators to apply and reinforce their own learning.

The development and execution of these workshops were conducted with the valuable guidance and support of the school staff, including dedicated mentors and associates, as well as the BOS project team. This collaborative effort ensured that the workshops were not only informative but also aligned with the educational objectives of the program, providing a meaningful learning experience for all participants involved.

## 2. Challenges and Solutions:

At the outset of the virtual internship program, participants expressed significant concerns about how the program would unfold, particularly given their lack of experience with this type of fully virtual internship model. The concept of a completely virtual internship, coupled with the flexible work dynamics it entailed, was a new and somewhat daunting prospect for many.

To address these concerns and enhance the participants' comfort levels, the program incorporated a robust support system. A key element in alleviating their apprehensions was the provision of a dedicated full-time mentor. This mentor was accessible through various communication channels, not limited to just the virtual internship platform itself.

The availability of the mentor via multiple communication methods - such as email, video calls, and phone calls - proved instrumental in easing the transition to the virtual format. This accessibility ensured that participants had continuous support and guidance, fostering a more reassuring and collaborative learning environment. The mentor's diverse communication options helped bridge the gap between the virtual and real-world experiences, making the entire process more manageable and engaging for the interns.

The involvement of teachers and school associates played an important role in the success of the virtual internship program, and provided great support for both students and mentors. Their active participation in regularly monitoring students' progress and offering additional support was particularly impactful, especially for those with less developed ICT skills. By addressing individual challenges and offering personalized guidance, these educators helped to bridge the gap between students' varying levels of ICT proficiency. Their involvement significantly enhanced students' motivation and confidence, as they felt more supported and encouraged throughout the internship process.

## 3. Recommendations:

The virtual internship program was thoughtfully designed **based on a thorough assessment of students' needs**, specifically focusing on the development of career management skills. Recognizing the importance of these skills in preparing students for their future careers, the program was tailored to address these needs directly.

A key feature of the program was its **emphasis on allowing students to apply their newly acquired knowledge in a practical, real-world context**. This opportunity for hands-on application significantly enhanced their motivation, as it provided a tangible connection between their learning and its real-life relevance. By engaging in practical tasks, students could see the immediate impact of their efforts and how their skills translated into real-world scenarios.

Additionally, the program was structured with **sufficiently flexible deadlines** for work tasks. This flexibility was intentional, enabling participants to adjust their schedules and workloads according to their individual capabilities and needs. This adaptable approach helped students manage their time more effectively and reduced potential stress, further boosting their motivation and engagement throughout the program.

## Section 2: Best Practices Report Data

### 1. Summary of Relevant Data:

The Europe Best Practice Report is developed based on the virtual internships programs were created and implemented by the partners from Italy (PIXEL), North Macedonia (National Youth Council of Macedonia), Serbia (Belgrade Open School) and Spain (XANO Channel), with the support of different stakeholders, from the period from December 2023 to March 2024. Following the evaluation gathered from the participants, mentors and other stakeholders, the Europe Best Practice Report provides an in-depth look at the best practices that have emerged from the implementation of virtual internship programs across various European countries.

Regarding the virtual internship program in Serbia, the conclusions and recommendations emerged from evaluations conducted by students, professional associates, by the members of the BOS team. These insights highlight areas for improving various internship models and are applicable to virtual formats that incorporate digital elements into the learning and development of young people. Feedback from the program participants also revealed a desire for greater exposure to different facets of the hosting organization. They expressed interest in engaging in a hybrid model of practice for future initiatives. Regarding the program's content, participants noted that it was instrumental in developing additional skills, which they believe will be beneficial for their ongoing career development.

### 2. Key Findings:

#### *Key Conclusions:*

- The virtual program allows students to participate regardless of their geographic location.
- Even though not all students had the necessary technical resources, they showed motivation and flexibility.
- Navigating the platform was a challenge for some participants.
- Students appreciated developing new digital skills.
- The support of teachers was highlighted as important.

### 3. Recommendations:

- Maintain continuous communication through various channels and consultative meetings.
- Harmonize the program with the school curriculum of students.
- Provide timely materials and support for skill development.
- Favor internship models oriented towards practice and concrete examples.

## Section 3: National Dialogues

### 1. Summary of Key Points:

From April to July 2024, the Belgrade Open School conducted a series of national dialogues. These discussions brought together young people who had engaged in the virtual internship program, school representatives, and key stakeholders from education and employment institutions and employers. The dialogues aimed to gather insights and feedback on critical issues affecting the intersection of education and employment. Through these exchanges, several key areas for improvement were identified.

First, there is a pressing need to **enhance the opportunities and resources available in secondary schools** to better prepare students with the relevant skills and competencies required by the labor market. Additionally, the dialogues highlighted the importance of strengthening cooperation between educational institutions and employers to create more effective pathways for student internships and job placements.

Another significant issue that emerged is the **absence of comprehensive systemic solutions addressing internship programs in Serbia**. Currently, the lack of a standardized framework means that internships can vary widely in quality and consistency, leading to disparities in the experiences of interns. To address this gap, there has been a proposal for the introduction of a Law on Internships. This proposed legislation aims to establish clear and enforceable minimum quality standards that employers must adhere to when mentoring interns. Key components of this law would include formal internship contract, ensuring that the terms and expectations are clearly outlined. Additionally, the law would mandate financial compensation for interns, recognizing their contributions and providing them with fair remuneration. It would also require employers to offer structured mentoring, providing guidance and support throughout the internship period. Finally, the proposal includes regulations on the duration of internships to prevent exploitative practices and ensure that the experience remains valuable and educational. By implementing such a law, the goal is to create a more equitable and structured environment for internships, ultimately benefiting both interns and employers. As this is relevant for the internship framework in general, specific discussion on virtual internship program presents a long-term possibility for the decision-makers and representatives of the institutions.

Although representatives of schools and institutions recognize the progress made to facilitate students' transition from education (improvement of the dual education system, more cooperation with employers and the local community, variety of internship programs, etc.), from the students' perspective, these **advances are not sufficiently recognizable among them**.

Another significant challenge that has been identified is the **lack of awareness among smaller companies and enterprises regarding flexible work arrangements** that could facilitate better connections with young people. This issue is particularly pronounced for young individuals in

smaller towns or rural areas, where access to large companies is limited, and daily commutes to corporate headquarters may not be feasible. This lack of information and adaptation can prevent young people from engaging with these businesses, thus missing out on potential employment opportunities and career development. Addressing this gap requires targeted efforts to educate smaller enterprises about the benefits of flexible work arrangements and to promote strategies that enable young people in less accessible areas to connect with local businesses effectively. With this in mind, as well as non-sufficiently defined legal regulations, employers are often left to their own devices when it comes to organizing internship programs for young people.

## 2. Challenges Identified:

- Deficient space for dialogue with youth and a lack of opportunities for young people to participate in the processes of public policy development as well as in the development of programs intended for them.
- The absence of a Law on Internships in Serbia that would allow employers and companies to more clearly arrange the environment in which young people will develop their skills.
- Lack of information among smaller companies / businesses on how they can create a more flexible work environment (hybrid or fully virtual).
- Lack of system regulations (laws, regulations, recommendations from relevant ministries) that would regulate internship programs operating in hybrid or fully virtual environment.

## 3. Recommendations:

- Using a bottom-up approach in order to respond adequately to the needs of youth and engaging them into decision-making processes;
- Development of structured and consistent local / regional dialogues with youth to discuss operationalization of different measures with the support of local / regional authorities;
- Regular informing of companies / enterprises about different modalities and resources for development of internships programs with the support of different actors, including civil – society organizations, schools and youth offices.
- Adoption of Law of Internship that would ensure minimum quality standards.

## Section 4: Study Visits

### 1. Summary of Key Insights:

The Belgrade Open School participated in the study visit to Brussels that was organized from 13 to 17 May 2024. The participants of the visit were representatives of partner organizations of the project and participants of different models of virtual internships, who had the opportunity to share their observations and dilemmas during a panel discussion with representatives of institutions and organizations that deal with young people in different fields to enable them to integrate into society and realize their potential. In addition, the participants visited several organizations working with

and for young people at the EU level, using their capacities to enable young people to develop employability skills, with a particular focus on young people from vulnerable groups.

The study visit provided an opportunity for networking and sharing knowledge and examples of good practice in the field of creating a stimulating environment and engaging in a dialog with decision-makers at the national and EU level to enable young people, especially members of different vulnerable social groups, to become equal members of society. The organizations visited by the participants explained in detail their activities in the field of realizing the rights of young people, especially in the areas of education, training, working practices, housing, and mobility of young people. In addition, the participants of the study visit had the opportunity to find out what the process of advocacy with the European Union institutions looks like and to learn about the challenges youth, especially students, students, and unemployed young people, face when entering the labor market.

## 2. Best Practices Observed:

Although internship programs implemented in a virtual environment offer numerous benefits for both practitioners and companies, such as increased flexibility, access to a global talent pool, and reduced overhead costs, companies often encounter significant administrative challenges when hiring young people from different countries. These challenges are particularly pronounced when dealing with interns from non-EU countries.

During study visit, participants were informed about **different regulations among EU countries** that are harmonized in order to ease internship programs and cross-border hiring, mostly through The European Labour Authority and different Erasmus plus programs.

Other significant examples of good practice refer to illustrations of how working in a digital environment has **changed the expectations of youth and their needs**. In addition, it is also a fact that working in a digital (or hybrid) environment has had a significant impact on both the education and work of adult workers. Also, this has had a substantial impact on **changing the narrative in some countries, so we are no longer talking about brain drain, but about digital nomads and worker mobility**. Also, some of the organizations have developed a model for involving young people in decision-making processes through the **organization of regular public events** with decision-makers at the EU level, specifically when it comes to improving the position of students. The visit to these organizations revealed that European entities addressing youth learning, education, and employment also grapple with additional critical issues affecting young people, such as housing, scholarships, and mental health. These insights underscore the **importance of considering a broader context when analyzing internship programs**. It's essential to recognize that these programs encompass more than just educational outcomes or secure employment prospects; they must also address the diverse needs and challenges youth face today.

## 3. Recommendations:

- It is necessary to define a more systematic model of informing educational institutions and employers about opportunities for youth mobility, especially at the level of the EU and non-EU countries.

- It is necessary to raise awareness among educational institutions, and especially among teachers and schools' associates about the significance of youth mobility.
- Developing internship programs, and especially internships that take place in a virtual environment, implies taking into account various aspects, such as administrative solutions, travel or accommodation of the intern, his further development, and mental health;
- Through exchanges with representatives of institutions and organizations, it was noticed that most programs are focused on university students, which indicates the need for additional programs for youth from other target groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

- It is necessary to define a more systematic model of informing educational institutions and employers about opportunities for youth mobility, especially at the level of the EU and non-EU countries.
- Through exchanges with representatives of institutions and organizations, it was noticed that most programs are focused on university students, which indicates the need for additional programs for youth from other target groups.
- Development of structured and consistent local / regional dialogues with youth to discuss operationalization of different measures with the support of local / regional authorities;
- Regular informing of companies / enterprises about different modalities and resources for development of internships programs with the support of different actors, including civil – society organizations, schools and youth offices.
- Favor internship models oriented towards practice and concrete examples.