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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

About the VI4IS Project

The **Virtual Internships for Inclusive Societies (VI4IS)** project, co-funded by the European Union, is dedicated to **enhancing access to internship opportunities for young people across Europe, particularly those from underserved communities**. Specifically targeting participants in Serbia, North Macedonia, Spain, and Italy, the project aims to **remove geographical and socio-economic barriers that often limit youth participation in internship programs**. By promoting virtual internships, VI4IS seeks to offer equal opportunities for all youth, ensuring that they can develop the necessary skills and gain practical experience crucial for their transition from education to the labor market.

The project is a collaborative effort involving several partners, including **JA Europe, Belgrade Open School (BOS), JA Serbia, XANO Channel, Pixel, and the National Youth Council of Macedonia**. Together, these organizations engage in a **broad consultation process at the country level, assess existing virtual internship frameworks, and exchange knowledge and good practices at both national and transnational levels**.

The main activities of **VI4IS include piloting new virtual internship programs and improving existing ones across Europe**. Through these efforts, the project aims to ensure that **all young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, have access to adequately funded non-formal education and meaningful internship experiences**. Since its inception, the VI4IS project has successfully engaged **165 young participants, making strides toward fostering inclusivity in the internship landscape**.

About the Policy Recommendations Paper

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 all participating countries (Serbia, North Macedonia, Spain and Italy) 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 each 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.

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Introduction

The increasing digitization of the labor market has necessitated a reevaluation of internship models, particularly in light of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual internships have emerged as **a vital tool for enhancing youth employability, providing flexible, accessible, and relevant professional experiences**. However, to fully leverage their potential, a robust framework of policy recommendations is needed across Europe. This document synthesizes insights from various regional reports, including Serbia, North Macedonia, Spain, and Italy, and outlines a comprehensive strategy for enhancing the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of virtual internships.

The Importance of a Defined Framework for Virtual Internships

As the landscape of youth employment continues to evolve, it **is crucial to establish a comprehensive framework for virtual internships**. Unlike remote work, which primarily involves completing tasks for an employer from a distance, **virtual internships are structured learning experiences that combine practical work tasks with educational objectives**. They are specifically designed to **foster skill development and professional growth**.

A primary recommendation of this document is to **create a clear definition and scope for virtual internships**. This framework should encompass the following key elements:

- **Definition and Scope:** Virtual internships should be distinctly defined as **structured learning experiences that integrate hands-on tasks with mentorship and educational goals**. This differentiation from remote work is essential, as the latter often focuses solely on task completion without a robust learning component.

By establishing a well-defined framework, we can ensure that all stakeholders—including policymakers, educational institutions, and employers—understand the unique value and purpose of virtual internships. This will facilitate best practices across the four participating countries: Serbia, North Macedonia, Spain, and Italy, ultimately supporting underserved communities and maximizing the potential of virtual internships to enhance youth employability and social inclusion.

Enhancing Technological Infrastructure

One of the foremost challenges highlighted in the reports is the **digital divide across Europe**, with distinct disparities between EU and non-EU countries. EU countries like Spain and Italy generally have more developed digital infrastructure and broader broadband coverage, which facilitates access to remote learning and virtual work. In contrast, non-EU countries, such as Serbia and North Macedonia, often face greater technological limitations, particularly in rural areas, where high-speed internet and modern devices remain less accessible.



In Spain, where digital infrastructure is comparatively advanced, the focus has shifted to providing additional digital literacy training to enhance students' adaptability to remote work settings. In cases where beneficiaries lacked necessary equipment, efforts were made to supply them with the required tools. Spanish stakeholders emphasize that ongoing technological support, including devices and high-quality internet access, is essential to ensure all students can fully participate in virtual internships, regardless of location or economic background.

Conversely, in Serbia and North Macedonia, many rural areas face significant access issues. For instance, participants in these regions frequently encountered challenges related to limited internet connectivity and inadequate device availability, which impacted their ability to engage effectively in virtual internships. Addressing these barriers requires targeted solutions to bridge the digital gap.

To mitigate these challenges across all regions, the project recommends a multi-faceted approach: providing devices, such as laptops and tablets, to students in need; ensuring high-speed internet access, especially in under-resourced areas; and fostering partnerships among educational institutions, technology companies, and government agencies to support these efforts. Additionally, digital literacy programs should be implemented to help students navigate digital tools, collaborate effectively in virtual environments, and understand essential cybersecurity principles—skills increasingly vital in today's job market.

Promoting Inclusivity and Accessibility

Inclusivity in virtual internships is **essential to ensure that all students, regardless of background, have equitable opportunities**. The VI4IS project revealed that while virtual internships can significantly broaden access, **persistent structural inequalities remain**, especially for students from low-income backgrounds, rural areas, and marginalized communities. In the EU countries involved in the project, like Spain and Italy, there is generally broader institutional support for inclusivity through existing educational frameworks and funding mechanisms aimed at disadvantaged students. However, in non-EU countries like Serbia and North Macedonia, limitations in funding, digital infrastructure, and institutional support present additional barriers for low-income and rural students.

To counteract these disparities, targeted initiatives should be implemented to diversify internship opportunities across emerging sectors such as green technologies, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology, which are crucial for a future-ready workforce. This sectoral expansion would make virtual internships appealing and accessible to a wider range of students, aligning opportunities with the evolving labor market.

Additionally, creating targeted support mechanisms for underrepresented groups, including those with disabilities, is essential. Insights from Italy highlight the need for continuous support for students during their internships. This includes not only mentorship but also access to technological resources and learning platforms that facilitate professional development in a virtual setting. Providing such support mechanisms for underrepresented groups, including those with disabilities, is essential. These mechanisms should include financial assistance, adaptive technologies, and ongoing guidance to ensure equitable access and a meaningful learning experience for all. By addressing these regional disparities, virtual internships can become a more inclusive bridge to meaningful employment for youth across both EU and non-EU countries.

Strengthening Mentoring and Supervision

The effectiveness of virtual internships heavily relies on the **quality of mentorship and supervision provided**. Reports emphasize the importance of structured mentoring frameworks that include regular evaluations and continuous support for interns.

To enhance mentoring, **training programs should be developed for mentors focusing on virtual communication techniques and effective feedback mechanisms**. Continuous supervision is vital; internship programs should incorporate periodic evaluations to facilitate ongoing improvement and skill development for interns. By establishing clear objectives and providing constructive feedback, mentors can significantly impact the interns' professional growth.

The experiences from each participating country highlight unique approaches and lessons in strengthening mentoring and support:

Italy: The Italian report underscores the importance of continuous support during internships, emphasizing the need for not only mentorship but also access to technological resources and learning platforms to foster professional growth in a virtual setting.

Serbia: At the start of the virtual internship program, Serbian participants expressed initial concerns about the unfamiliar, fully virtual format and flexible work dynamics. To address this, a dedicated full-time mentor was made available through multiple communication channels, including email, video calls, and phone calls, providing continuous support and easing interns' transition to the virtual model. Teachers and school associates also played a critical role by offering individualized guidance, particularly for interns with less developed ICT skills. This active involvement boosted students' motivation and confidence, creating a supportive learning environment.

Spain: To further strengthen mentoring, Spain recommends implementing more structured mentoring programs that include periodic evaluations and continuous support. Specific training for mentors in virtual communication and feedback techniques is advised to ensure effective guidance in a remote setting.

North Macedonia: Recognizing the importance of feedback and improvement, North Macedonia emphasizes the need for comprehensive monitoring systems for virtual internships. These systems would allow for regular feedback from interns and organizations, promoting ongoing enhancement of the internship experience.

By incorporating these diverse approaches, virtual internships can be enriched with tailored mentoring and support systems, fostering a more accessible and impactful professional growth environment for interns across different regions.

Integrating Internships with Educational Systems

Integrating virtual internships into the formal educational framework is crucial to maximize their effectiveness and encourage student participation. Reports from Spain and other regions suggest that aligning internships with educational curricula and providing academic credits can incentivize students to engage in these opportunities.

Collaboration between educational institutions and employers is essential to ensure that internship experiences are relevant to market expectations and skill requirements. This alignment will help students acquire the competencies necessary for their future careers while also enabling employers to access a skilled talent pool.

Promoting Networking and Professional Interaction

The **lack of personal interaction in virtual internships** is often cited as a significant drawback, limiting opportunities for students to build professional networks. To address this, creating **platforms for virtual networking** is vital. Online job fairs, webinars, and professional forums can provide avenues for interns to connect with industry professionals and peers, fostering a sense of community and professional development.

Moreover, **adopting hybrid internship models** that combine virtual and in-person components can offer the best of both worlds. This approach allows students to enjoy the flexibility of remote learning while still benefiting from direct contact with mentors and colleagues, enhancing their professional relationships and practical skill development.

Data-Driven Decision Making and Continuous Improvement

Implementing **systematic data collection and analysis** on virtual internship outcomes is crucial for assessing their effectiveness. Reports emphasize the need for monitoring mechanisms to evaluate the impact of these internships on students' employability and career trajectories.

Furthermore, establishing channels for interns to provide feedback on their experiences can be invaluable for refining and improving internship programs. By listening to the voices of interns, stakeholders can adapt their strategies to better meet the needs and expectations of students and employers alike.

Raising Awareness and Visibility

Raising awareness about the benefits of virtual internships is essential for increasing participation among students, employers, and educational institutions. Campaigns highlighting success stories and best practices can demonstrate the value of virtual internships and encourage broader engagement.

Additionally, **developing frameworks for recognizing and certifying virtual internship experiences** can enhance their credibility in the job market, providing students with tangible evidence of their skills and experiences.

Policy Framework and Support

Finally, the **development of supportive national and EU-level policies** is critical for promoting the integration of virtual internships into educational systems and labor markets.

To advance the integration of virtual internships into both educational systems and labor markets, our advocacy efforts are directed at EU policymakers, national governments, educational institutions, and industry leaders. We aim to encourage these stakeholders to allocate resources,

develop supportive policies, and collaborate across sectors to enhance virtual internship accessibility and quality.

At the EU level, we seek to engage policymakers to create standardized guidelines that outline best practices for virtual internships across member states. For example, the European Commission could introduce funding initiatives under programs like Erasmus.

The goal is to create a sustainable framework that addresses key challenges—such as the digital divide, inclusivity, and mentorship support—ensuring that young people, especially those from underserved communities, have access to meaningful professional development opportunities. Through targeted advocacy, we hope to build a policy environment that recognizes virtual internships as a vital tool for youth employability and prepares them for future workforce demands.

Conclusion

The insights gathered from the VI4IS project and regional reports highlight the **transformative potential of virtual internships in enhancing youth employability across Europe**. However, to realize this potential, it is essential to address existing barriers and improve the overall framework for virtual internships. By implementing the comprehensive policy recommendations outlined in this document, stakeholders can create a more inclusive, accessible, and effective virtual internship ecosystem that benefits students, educational institutions, and employers alike. Through collaborative efforts and continuous improvement, virtual internships can become a cornerstone of youth career development in Europe, preparing the next generation for a rapidly changing job market.