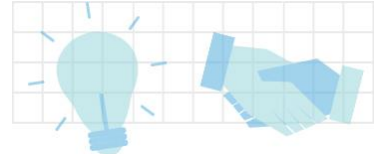




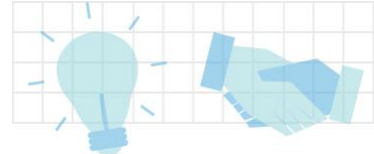
# Virtual internships for inclusive societies

*Europe Best Practice Report*



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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The main goal of the **Virtual Internships for Inclusive Societies (VI4IS)** project is to improve access of young people, particularly those with fewer opportunities, to internship programs conducted within formal and non-formal education in Europe. The project contributes to ensuring equal opportunities for all young people to develop the necessary skills and gain practical experience in order to smoothen the transition from education to the labor market and ensure that all young people have access to adequately funded non-formal education at all levels.

The main activities of the project are: broad consultation process on country level, assessment of virtual internships, exchange of knowledge and good practices, both country-based and transnational (national and EU level, between EU and non-EU countries), piloting new and improving existing virtual internships programs across Europe.

The **Virtual Internships for Inclusive Societies (VI4IS)** project is funded by the EU.

Europe Best Practice report is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or EACEA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

## ABOUT THE PARTNERS

### BELGRADE OPEN SCHOOL

The Belgrade Open School (BOS) is a non-profit, educational organization of civil society founded in 1993. BOS empowers and networks change-makers, improves public policies and brings together public, business and civil sectors to build a resilient society, based on knowledge, partnership and accountability.

BOS has a strong background in implementing projects for and by youth. Within the Employability and Career Guidance and Counseling programme area, BOS implemented more than 40 national and international projects focused on career guidance and counselling, has and reached more than 30000 young people, 50 youth offices, 80 schools, and more than 300 teachers.

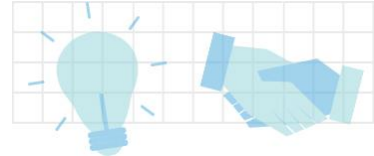
Starting from 2003, BOS has been encouraging the individual's continuous development, lifelong learning and overall economic development of our society by contributing to establishing the career guidance and counselling system and strengthening the connection between education and the labour market.

### JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT EUROPE

Junior Achievement Europe is the largest and leading European non-profit organization in entrepreneurship, work readiness and financial health programs for youth, dedicated to inspire and prepare young people to succeed and Member of JA Worldwide. For over 100 years, JA Worldwide has delivered hands-on, experiential learning in entrepreneurship, work readiness and financial health. In the last school year, the JA Europe network provided over 6.6 million learning experiences for youth in online, in person and blended formats.



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### JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT SERBIA

Junior Achievement Serbia is the only accredited provider of entrepreneurship education services in Serbia. It is a locally managed and funded entity affiliated with Junior Achievement Worldwide, a global organization founded 1919 in the USA. The overall goal of JAS is to educate young people in the field of entrepreneurship, financial literacy and business, and to enable the business sector to take an active role in preparing and inspiring the youth of Serbia to become contributing members of the society. Since 2005, JAS is operating as an independent non-government and non-profit organization.

JAS implements educational programs for elementary and high school students in the field of entrepreneurship, financial literacy and work readiness, verified by JA Worldwide and accredited by the Serbian Ministry of Education. The programs represent best practices in developing entrepreneurial skills and knowledge of the market economy and include activities like competitions, trade fairs and online contests. All programs are implemented through the educational system either as a part of the school curriculum or as an after-school activity.

### NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL OF MACEDONIA

The National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM) is a platform that represents the interests and needs of young people, acting as a link between all stakeholders and ensures the engagement and active participation of young people in the decision-making process at every level. The NYCM is a representative body of youth organizations in Republic of North Macedonia. The Council unites unions, youth-led organizations, youth-oriented organizations, and youth wings of other organizations in order to promote and represent the youth and youth rights in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The membership of the NYCM is diverse, uniting organizations operating at national and regional level, in rural and urban areas, student organizations, branches of international organizations and other types of associations. Throughout the process of achieving its goals, the NYCM represents the interests of young people in the Republic of North Macedonia regardless of their socio-economic status, gender, race, ethnic and cultural origin, political and religious beliefs, sexual orientation, gender identity or any other form of difference.

### PIXEL

Pixel is an education and training institution with more than 20 years of experience in the following areas: (1) Organization of international courses and seminars; (2) Planning and coordination of European projects; and (3) Organization of international events and conferences.

Pixel has successfully coordinated and managed more than 140 European projects. In Italy, Pixel collaborates with various organizations, including universities, research centers, educational and vocational training institutions, adult education institutes, and schools. At the European level, Pixel has developed cooperation agreements and partnerships with more than 500 institutions. Pixel has been organizing international conferences since 2001. Among them, three are organized annually.

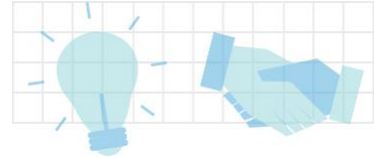


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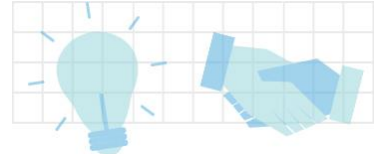


## XANO

XANO, created in 2010, aims to promote growth opportunities for individuals and for society in general by creating synergies, tools and methodologies for the dissemination of culture and promotion of active citizenship among people and organizations.

The organization is an association of secondary education school teachers, vocational education teachers and trainers in different disciplines that focuses its activities on the field of education, training and cultural promotion in the European environment, qualified in fields such as youth work, student entrepreneurship, voluntary aid and other topics. Furthermore, the association works as a hub for the guidance of socially disadvantaged young people by means of strategies that insert young people into the educational system or the world of work. The activities and objectives of the organization are inspired by the principles of equal opportunities for disadvantaged people and between men and women.





## PREFACE

In today's digital era, characterized by an increasingly global and interconnected economy, virtual internship programs are emerging as an innovative solution to provide accessible and inclusive professional learning opportunities. This Europe Best Practice Report, developed within the project Virtual internship for inclusive societies explores the fundamental needs that have driven the adoption of such programs across the European Union, highlighting their benefits and implementation challenges.

Stemming from a context of rapid technological changes and an ever-evolving employment landscape, virtual internship programs aim to bridge the gap between education and industry, preparing young talents to meet the demands of the modern workforce.

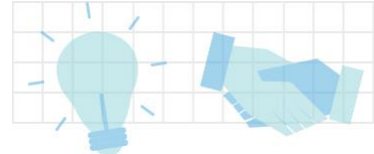
Through cutting-edge digital platforms, as the and cross-sectoral collaborations, these programs offer a flexible and future-oriented learning experience, transcending geographical and socioeconomic barriers.

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. The programs were developed within the *Work Package 3: Applying Virtual Internship in Practice European-Wide* of the project.

The virtual internship programs for Italy, North Macedonia, Serbia and Spain are available on <https://vi4is.com/>. In total, more than 150 participants were involved in the more than 10 different programs with the support of more than 20 companies and legal entities.

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. It examines notable case studies basing on the partnership experience in implementing such models through the use of **Chamilo**, an open-source e-learning platform designed for creating and managing online courses, distance learning, and virtual learning that offers tools for creating educational content, managing students, monitoring performance, and evaluating students, suitably adapted and made available by the Belgrade Open School which provided all the necessary support regarding its functioning.

Key topics addressed in the report include the importance of collaboration between academic institutions, businesses, and vocational training organizations, strategies for ensuring technological accessibility, and the creation of an engaging virtual learning environment. It also explores the challenges related to participant mindsets and expectations, as well as the solutions adopted to overcome them.



## 1. VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS PROGRAMS IN ITALY

### Description of the internship program

The implementation of **virtual Internship programs** in **Italy** has been managed and monitored by Pixel. The design phase of the virtual internship programs progressed along two different lines of action, with Pixel working both independently as a strategic partner of the project and as the leading partner of the reference work package, and in collaboration with the association ITS Teramo, involved in project activities as a training provider. This cooperation, formalized through a document co-signed by both associations to define its terms and purposes, represented the starting point in organizing virtual internships.

The first question to address was which model would be most suitable for implementation within the Italian context. Based on data obtained through a reconnaissance conducted during the previous phases of the VI4IS project through Desk research but also, and above all, thanks to feedback collected through questionnaires administered during the “National Fora” held in the three locations of Teramo, Milan, and Florence between June and July 2023, Pixel opted for the implementation of **hybrid internship models** rather than fully virtual modes as initially hypothesized.

The main reason for this decision was the need to overcome skepticism expressed by companies and employers regarding the feasibility of implementing fully virtual internship models. This solution was highlighted by the results provided by the **SWAT Analysis** derived from the analysis of data obtained through questionnaires specially designed and administered during the National Fora, aimed at assessing the expectations of the project's target groups, namely:  
young people approaching the world of work for the first time, with particular reference to those from rural areas or with fewer opportunities, companies and employers, training agencies.

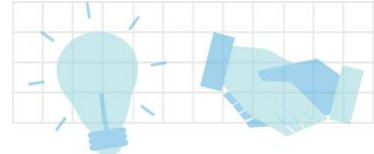
In particular, the SWAT Analysis highlighted the following “**Weaknesses**” related to fully virtual internship models in the Italian context:

- Lack of face-to-face interaction
- Difficulty in organizing and monitoring the activities and tasks assigned to future interns
- Centrality of the manual component of work for some companies

At the same time, the analysis also highlighted the opportunity to organize hybrid internships, as they would allow for better monitoring of the intern and broadening the spectrum of tasks that can be covered. With the best reference model defined, the next step was to search for a **training provider** to provide logistical support for the implementation of the internship programs. This role was identified in the association **ITS Teramo**, which had previously hosted the first of the national forums organized by Pixel, providing important feedback and facilitating networking activities with local companies, whose involvement proved essential for the success of the activities.



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The selection process of participants, managed and supervised by Pixel, aimed to prioritize the inclusion of individuals belonging to the main target groups of the project in the internship programs, and particularly focused on the specific criteria for selection of students from rural areas and with disabilities.

In total, 23 interns were identified during the candidate selection process. All individuals held a high school diploma. Of these, 77% were under 30 years of age, with little or no previous professional experience, while only 13% were 30 years old or older and, at the same time, had a significant professional background although not particularly specialized.

Concurrently with the participants selection process, Pixel directly managed the selection process of the companies where interns would carry out hybrid internships. 22 companies were identified for a total of 9 different internship programs, 9 of which were identified by ITS Teramo as training providers in the Agri-Food sector and 14 identified by Pixel in the European Project Management field.

For each intern, a **learning agreement** was drawn up and co-signed by both trainers and companies to define and agree upon the learning objectives and activities that the intern would carry out during the internship period at the host company. At the same time, a system for evaluating activities from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective was set up.

All interns were registered on the Chamilo platform, which was used by companies for communication and monitoring of interns during the online activities, as well as for uploading educational materials accessible to them in the course of their studies, proving to be an excellent tool capable of garnering numerous positive feedbacks from both interns and trainers.

## Evaluation of the program

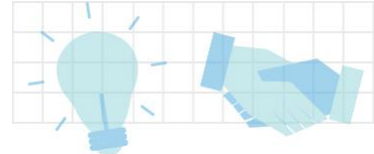
Hybrid internships organized and coordinated by Pixel in the Italian reference context have proven to be successful, as evidenced by the analysis of data resulting from the results of questionnaires on a scale from 1 to 5, administered to interns and aimed at evaluating their hybrid internship experience from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective.

To the question *"How useful did you find the virtual component in the context of the activities inherent in your internship?"*, Interns gave an encouraging average score of 4 out of 5, demonstrating the suitability of the strategy adopted in the design phase of the internship programs. Although the hybrid mode may entail the need to address significant challenges arising from the lack of face-to-face contact, the full score (5 out of 5) obtained in reference to the question *"How much have you been involved in the planned activities during the internship?"* shows how positive synergy between companies and interns can be established regardless of the physical presence of the latter in the workplace, fully ensuring communication technologies the full integration of the intern into the company's professional life and extending this possibility also to individuals who, due to acknowledged physical or territorial disadvantages, would not have had the opportunity to take advantage of this opportunity in person.



National Youth Council  
of Macedonia





Finally, it seemed relevant to highlight the occupational value of the activities mentioned above, with interns who, in response to the question "*How much do you think the internship is contributing to the development of your professional skills?*", provided an average score of 4/5.

However, the analysis of data resulting from the outcome of online internships has not failed to highlight some **critical issues** that are worth mentioning in order to establish a virtuous circle in a sector still little explored but with great potential such as that of hybrid and virtual internships.

In detail, the hybrid internship model proposed here has made it clear the need to find a **correct balance between in-person and online activities**, as evidenced by the fact that feedback from 10 interns out of a total of 23 regarding the indicator "*Expose a weakness in your internship experience*" referred to an excessive number of online activities. This could be related to the type of productive fabric examined: since this feedback mainly comes from interns who participated in the programs implemented in the context of companies operating in the Agri-food sector, it is likely to assume that interns prefer to "get their hands dirty" in the production context, in order to acquire skills applicable at every level of the company's life.

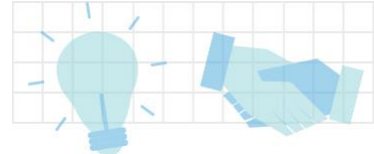
In our opinion, this should not discourage the attempt to export this model to broader contexts than those proposed by this piloting, but rather encourage the continuation of a dialogue already established between the parties in search of an optimal balance between interns' expectations and employers' needs in order to continue to formulate different proposals that, starting from these assumptions, can lead all parties involved to achieve a higher standard in terms of qualitative proposal and level of satisfaction.

## Lessons learned and recommendations

- **What we can do better next time?** The experience gained during the design and piloting phase of hybrid internship programs has led us to formulate the following suggestions that can serve as best practices for the implementation of future programs:
- **Continuous assessment of the needs of the national context:** it is important to continue gathering feedback and conducting analyses to adapt the program to the evolving needs of the national context. Labor market dynamics and business requirements may change over time, so it's essential to remain flexible and adaptable.
- **Regional variations:** considering the regional differences within the national context might be advantageous to further personalize internship programs based on the specific needs and characteristics of each region.
- **Ongoing partnerships with companies:** continuing to cultivate strong relationships with partner companies is crucial for the program's success. Feedback analysis can be used to further enhance collaboration and ensure that internship activities align with companies' needs and expectations.



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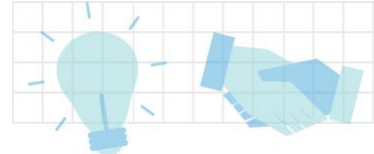


- **Program expansion:** Considering expanding the program to involve a larger number of interns and companies in different Italian regions. This could help maximize the program's impact and provide opportunities to a broader range of young people.





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## 2. VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS PROGRAMS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

### Description of the internship program

The Virtual Internships for Inclusive Societies (VI4IS) in North Macedonia was a collaborative effort, which at first included application from 15 legal entities from various fields, including youth work, activism and employability skills, developing and assisting technical, technological and industrial applied research and development, youth development and activism and youth health, health, social protection, environmental protection and improving public information, leadership education and management, personal and professional development, empowerment of women and female leadership, coaching, gender equality and ecology. These legal entities served as the providers of the internship opportunities, offering valuable learning experiences to the young participants. The NYCM selected 10 out of it, including ANANAS MK LLC, Association for Sustainable Development SFERA International, Foundation for Management and Industrial Research, Association for Personal Development and Youth Health Improvement - YOUTH INSTITUTE, PREVENTUS, INSPIRIT COACHING LLC, Association for International Youth Cooperation Interactive HZ Bravura Cooperative, Organization Women, Ecological Society Vila Zora and National Youth Council of Macedonia, and they played a crucial role in providing valuable learning experiences to the interns.

Through the work and engagement of these legal entities on the platform, diverse courses covering an extensive range of topics were created. These courses are meticulously designed to offer invaluable learning opportunities and practical skill development for participants. Among the offerings are courses on Social Media Management, Stakeholder Communication, Event Logistics Familiarization, Aarhus Convention: Environmental Decision-Making Procedures, Social Media Post Design, Research and Content Creation on "Mental Hygiene," Social Inclusion Strategies, Effective Project Management, Communication Skills and Public Relations, and Book Editing Essentials. Each course serves as a valuable resource for interns seeking to enhance their knowledge and expertise in these key areas.

Central to the success were the trainers and mentors who were actually the employers/providers of the internship, which guided interns through a virtual learning environment and practically took over the role of mentors and trainers, and not supervisors. In that way, it was emphasized a shift from traditional employer-employee dynamics to a mentor-mentee relationship for legal entities, encouraging them to serve as mentors rather than solely employers. It was highlighted the importance of building a supportive and nurturing environment for young individuals, promoting a collaborative mentor-mentee relationship for mutual growth and development. This fully virtual internship model enabled interns to participate remotely and gain insights into a wide range of topics relevant to the fields of the participating legal entities.

The NYCM carefully curated the participation in the virtual internship program through a series of strategic steps to ensure a diverse and inclusive cohort, more specifically in regards to giving leverage to those who are coming from rural areas, and young people who did not have previous working experience.

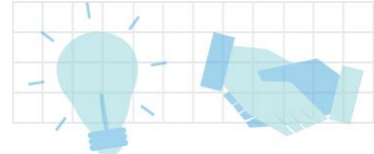


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As for that, the NYCM began the selection process with a comprehensive mapping of potential organizations/companies (providers) and young individuals, followed by targeted outreach efforts to encourage participation, especially among those, as described above, residing outside the central city area.

The focus and emphasis were on tailoring internship placements for the young people to match the diverse backgrounds and interests of them, the young applicants, ensuring alignment with their desired career paths. As for that, a comprehensive selection process was implemented at the very beginning, meticulously evaluating applicants to select 20 interns. Candidates under the age of 30 and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds were prioritized, with deliberate efforts made to include individuals from various cities to cover a broad geographical area within the country. Of course, emphasis was placed on gender and ethnic diversity, ensuring representation from diverse backgrounds and communities. Opportunities for rural applicants in North Macedonia were specifically highlighted, acknowledging their unique challenges and contributions.

From the very beginning of the announcement of the call, the 100 applicants applied for the virtual internship programme. Later in that stage, after narrowing down the participants (based on the eligibility criteria, age, gender, place of residence) we had 20 participants, as it was mentioned above, which was a huge drop - out. The reason for the huge drop out arose after the first online meeting when we informed the participants (even though we did announce the same in the call) that the internship is not going to be paid. That is the main reason why a lot of young people decided that they are not going to participate in unpaid internships. In regards to the providers and their dropout are merely because the internship was new to them, which naturally meant that it will be out of the conventional ways of conducting the internship. Some of them saluted the new approach, but some of them were unable to get used to the new approach, so they decided to withdraw.

Another reason for the dropout is because of the (not)smooth operation of the platform, from the providers side. The interns managed the platform and found it easy to use, but the providers were avoiding it in any way possible, and instead they used some other ways of communicating with their interns, which suited the providers best. This was also the reason for some of the interns to back up for the reason because they were instructed in the online meeting to use the platform, and the interns employed their own way, which made confusion in regards.

## Evaluation of the program

### *Interns' evaluation results*

We conducted detailed evaluations of our virtual internship program, creating separate forms for interns and legal entities to gather feedback. The interns overwhelmingly conducted their internships online, with only a small percentage using a combination model.

When asked to rate their overall internship experience on a scale from 1 to 10, the majority gave high marks, with 30.8% rating it a 10. 23.1% gave it a 9, and 7.7% rated it a 7. However, 7.7% gave the lowest rating of 1, and 15.4% rated it between 3 and 6.



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Regarding whether the internship met their expectations, over half of the interns gave the highest rating of 10. In terms of platform functionality, 30.8% rated it a 10, 23.1% rated it an 8, and 15.4% rated it a 2.

Suggestions for improvement included redesigning the frontend, reducing the number of fields to avoid confusion, and providing clearer explanations about available courses and internship details.

Despite some areas for improvement, a significant portion of interns found the internship concept effective and would apply again. However, a notable percentage expressed dissatisfaction and indicated they would not reapply. Overall, 53.8% of interns thought the concept was effective and realistically applicable, and 61.5% would consider applying for the virtual internship program again, while some remained undecided.

### ***Providers evaluation results***

The evaluation form designed for providers/legal entities aimed to gather relevant information, ensuring that the questions were well-prepared and suitable for their purposes.

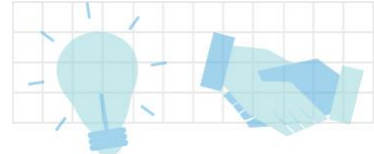
When asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the virtual internship experience on a scale from 1 to 10, 28.6% gave the highest rating of 10, 14.3% rated it a 9, 28.6% rated it an 8, and 14.3% rated it between 3 and 5. However, when asked if the internship fulfilled their expectations, only 14.3% gave the highest rating, while a notable 42.9% rated it an 8.

Similarly, when asked if the concept of virtual internship was effective and realistically applicable, 28.6% gave it a 10, and 42.9% gave it an 8.

Providers were also given the opportunity to express any challenges they faced with the virtual internship. Some mentioned problems with communication with interns and the platform's complexity, which lacked clear instructions. Others faced issues with setting tasks in the system and encountered role assignment problems. However, some found the experience innovative and practical, while others mentioned personal workload and intern-related issues as challenges.

Despite these challenges, 85.7% of providers expressed interest in applying to be part of the virtual internship program again, while 14.3% would not.

The distribution of participants in our national context showed us that Skopje had the highest participation rate, with approximately 31.25% of participants located in the capital. Gostivar and Sveti Nikole each account for 12.5% of participants, indicating a substantial presence from these cities. Pehchevo, Kochani, Kumanovo, Demir Hisar, Veles, Prilep, and Delcevo each have a participation rate of approximately 6.25%, demonstrating a relatively equal distribution of participants across these cities. This distribution reflects a diverse geographical representation in the virtual internship program, with a strong showing from both major cities and smaller municipalities. It is also noteworthy that nearly 90% of the interns were students, either enrolled in university or in their final year of high school.



## Lessons learned and recommendations

From the process of implementing the Virtual Internships program in Macedonian context, we have learned several key lessons.

- Firstly, the initial engagement of nearly 100 young people and approximately 15 legal entities demonstrated the program's appeal and potential impact. Exactly this highlights the importance of effective outreach and communication strategies in attracting participants.
- Secondly, the meticulous selection process, which prioritized candidates under 30 and from rural areas, underscored the program's commitment to diversity and inclusivity of young people who had never had previous working experience. This reaffirmed the value of ensuring equal opportunities for all, regardless of background or circumstances.
- Thirdly, the orientation meetings played a crucial role in ensuring participants understood the project goals, their roles, and the technical aspects of the platform. This emphasized the importance of clear communication and support mechanisms in ensuring a smooth implementation process of the programme. However, challenges were also encountered, particularly concerning responsiveness and platform understanding. This highlighted the need for ongoing support and training to address these issues effectively.

In conclusion, the implementation process has shown us the importance of thorough planning, clear communication, and flexibility in program design. It has also highlighted areas for improvement, such as the need for ongoing support and training, which will be valuable for future iterations of the program.

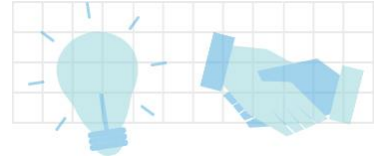
It became evident that engaging both young people and legal entities requires a tailored approach, with a focus on inclusivity and diversity. The selection process showed us the significance of prioritizing candidates from underrepresented backgrounds, as this not only enriches the program but also aligns with our commitment to equity. The challenges faced with responsiveness and platform understanding underscored the need for ongoing support and training, highlighting areas for improvement in future iterations of the program.

Recommendations – what we can do better next time:

- Platform Restructuring: It is recommended to restructure and simplify the platform used for the program. This can involve making the platform less complicated, more user-friendly, and easier to navigate. Improvements in the platform's design and functionality can enhance the overall experience for both interns and legal entities.
- Capacity Building for Legal Entities: Providing training and resources to legal entities to enhance their understanding of their roles as mentors can improve the mentor-mentee relationship. This can result in a more supportive and nurturing environment for interns, fostering their professional growth and development.
- Remuneration for Interns: To encourage interns to give their full potential and be actively engaged, it is recommended to provide remuneration for their efforts. This not only recognizes the value of their work but also incentivizes them to fully commit to their roles.



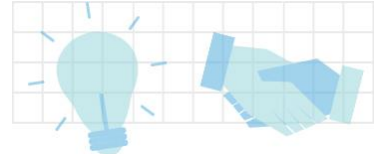
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- **International Exchange Opportunities:** Providing interns from different countries with the opportunity to intern at providers from other partner countries can enhance the program's diversity and cross-cultural exchange. This can enrich the learning experience for interns and promote international collaboration.
- **Enhanced Communication and Support:** Implementing more robust communication channels and support systems can help address challenges related to responsiveness and platform understanding. Providing regular updates, clear instructions, and access to technical support can improve the overall experience for participants.
- **Feedback Mechanism:** Establishing a feedback mechanism where interns and legal entities can provide input and suggestions for improvement can help identify areas for enhancement. This can ensure that future iterations of the program are more responsive to the needs and expectations of participants.
- **Evaluation and Monitoring:** Conducting regular evaluations and monitoring of the program's implementation can provide valuable insights into its effectiveness and impact. This can help identify strengths and weaknesses, allowing for continuous improvement.



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### 3. VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS PROGRAMS IN SERBIA

#### Description of the internship program

The Belgrade Open School organized the 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 practice 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. High school students who need support to further develop career management skills and empowerment for making career decisions to achieve their personal and professional potential as well as integration into the labor market, but also equal participation in the social life of the community were part of selection process. Students were selected to participate in the internship based on a survey conducted by professors and professional associates in schools, where the criteria for inclusion in the internship program were: students' motivation to participate in the internship, skills for using digital tools in education, the adequate geographical distribution of students and a gender-balanced approach. One of the goals of the virtual internship, in addition to informing participants about the possibilities of using digital tools in education, was to answer the question of to what extent such a model can contribute to the development or improvement of students' skills in using ICT tools in education. Therefore, students who have used digital tools in education so far, as well as students who have not yet had the opportunity to encounter a digital component in their education and training, were equally represented. The last round of selection included meetings of BOS team members, students, teachers, and professional associates to harmonize expectations from the program and create an initial support plan for students with no or little experience in using ICT tools in education.

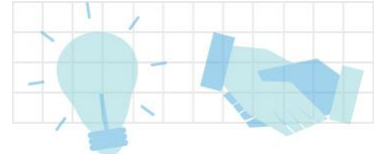
The program was organized completely online, while the members of the professional team of BOS performed the roles of mentors and trainers for the duration of the program, following their expertise. The internship program is organized through lessons in six weeks on the following topics:

- 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

Every two weeks the students were given new materials to read and develop/improve their employability and career management skills. Presentations and materials for reading were available to participants on the platform, as well as questions for reflection, and an open discussion within the Forum section. While by completing the materials, the participants solved tests to check their knowledge and skills.



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The BOS team provided timely feedback to the participants on their work and provided support for overcoming difficulties and resolving doubts regarding the material. In addition, the participants had the opportunity to communicate daily with the mentors and coaches of the BOS through the communication channels provided by the platform, but also through the personal emails and telephones of the mentors.

## Evaluation of the program

Conclusions and recommendations were based on evaluation by students, professional associates, and participants of the BOS team. They refer to the space for the improvement of different models of internships and can be applied to virtual and hybrid models of practices that imply the inclusion of a digital component in the development, advancement, and learning of young people.

The participants indicated that it meant a lot to them that they had a full-time mentor who was available to them through various communication channels in order to respond to work tasks in a timely and adequate manner. Also, schools had additional support for working on the platform, and they assessed it as very user-friendly. The participants of the program indicated that they would also like to have gotten to know more aspects of the organization that was the provider and that in the following period or a similar initiative, they would like to participate in a hybrid model of practice. When it comes to the content itself, the participants indicated that this program helped them develop additional skills that will help them in their lifelong career development.

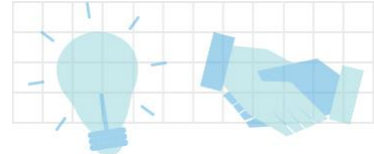
## Lessons learned and recommendations

### Conclusions:

- The full virtual internship model provided the opportunity for students to attend a program that is not in their city, regardless of where they live. In addition, this internship model enabled the participants to plan their time and complete tasks in accordance with their other activities;
- As the internship tended to gather students from economically disadvantage areas, not all participants had the necessary technical resources to access the platform (especially those from rural areas), but they showed motivation for participation and alternative forms of communication and sending tasks. Some students submitted photographs of their work to mentors/trainers. Some students did not have access to platform and materials, but they found a way to communicate with mentors and professional associates, via a Viber group or phone calls. In this way, all participants were able to participate and finish the internship process according to available resources;
- The participants pointed out that navigating the platform was challenging for them and that by the end of the internship, they were not able to fully overcome it and use it adequately, as they stated that the lack of visibility of the platform was the biggest challenge;
- The students pointed out that although they encountered the use of ICT tools in education, the practice contributed to the development of new skills. Students who have not used ICT tools in their training so far pointed out that the practical experience helped them develop skills for learning with the help of digital tools;



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- In developing the time frame for the implementation of the practice and setting up the materials, it is a good practice to consult with the students and teachers, so that the dynamics of the program would be coordinated with the school activities of the participants;
- Participants who were less motivated to work at the beginning of the program, made equal progress and performed tasks regularly as those who were more motivated;
- Students from the same schools performed tasks at approximately the same time;
- The support of the teachers was significant in communication with the students;
- Students gave the most extensive answers in cases of open questions and tasks that implied a description of the practical application of acquired knowledge and skills;
- The students pointed out that they had the necessary support from the BOS team for the duration of the internship, but communication through the communication channels available on the platform was not assessed as sufficient, it is important to organize periodic ZOOM meetings with the participants;
- Students estimate that the duration of the internship of 6 weeks is insufficient for adequate understanding and adoption of the offered and covered materials;
- Students highlighted that this topic supported them in their own career decisions and that they are willing to continue to participate in similar programs

### Recommendations:

- ✓ The virtual internship enables overcoming certain obstacles such as geographical distance, and provides the possibility of planning activities and harmonizing obligations related to an internship with life and other priorities. Therefore, it is a good way to acquire new knowledge, especially in cases where the students and the company are not in the same geographical area, but it is necessary to maintain continuous communication through different communication channels, but also to define in advance the calendar of mandatory consultative meetings of mentors and students;
- ✓ When it comes to internships intended for high school students when planning activities, it is necessary to harmonize the internship plan with their school curriculum;
- ✓ The students communicate that they need support during the implementation of the practice, so in addition to the mentoring approach, the support of the teachers is also necessary;
- ✓ Materials for additional development of existing or acquisition of new skills and knowledge should be distributed to students on time, with monitoring of individual progress and respecting the necessary time for mastering it;

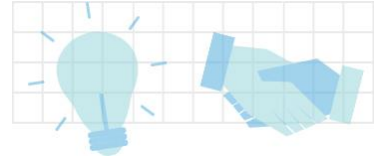


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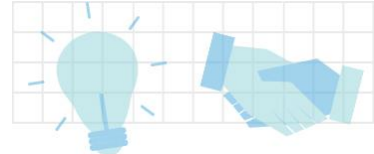




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- ✓ Students showed a greater preference for internship models that are practically oriented and contain concrete tasks that are explained through everyday examples. In addition, the student's personal experience, i.e. the model that provides them with the opportunity to acquire knowledge through familiar situations, was marked as more suitable.



## 4. VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS PROGRAMS IN SPAIN

### *Description of the internship program*

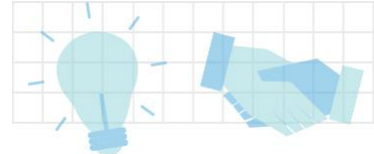
Virtual internship programs in Spain were developed and implemented by XANO Channel with the support of addition associates from different sectors. The internship programs in Spain involved fully virtual program related to financial literacy and basic IT course intended for high school students.

The programs present significant shift towards an integrated, technology-driven approach to bridging academic theory with practical professional experience. These programs leverage state-of-the-art digital platforms to create an immersive learning environment that transcends traditional geographic and logistical limitations.

The backbone of these virtual internships is a diverse consortium of providers and mentors, spanning from prestigious universities to dynamic tech companies and specialized training organizations, including vocational training schools. Each provider brings a unique set of resources, expertise, and perspectives to the programs, ensuring a rich and varied learning experience. For instance:

- Universities often partner with industry leaders to deliver academic rigor combined with practical insights. These partnerships can facilitate access to cutting-edge research and industry-standard tools and technologies, allowing interns to apply theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios.
- Tech companies offer a direct link to the commercial application of new technologies and systems. They play a crucial role in exposing interns to the latest developments in fields like software development, data analytics, and cybersecurity.
- VET schools are pivotal in integrating practical skills with professional training. These centers specialize in career-oriented education, providing interns with hands-on experience in technical and trade-specific skills. VET Schools focus on industries such as automotive technology, healthcare, construction, and culinary arts, which require specific practical competencies that are best learned through simulation and real-world application.
- VTCs often collaborate with local businesses and industries to ensure that the training they provide is aligned with current market needs and technological advancements. This collaboration not only enhances the relevancy of the internship programs but also increases the employability of the interns by providing them with industry-specific skills that are in high demand. Additionally, these centers often have robust mentorship programs where experienced professionals guide interns through the nuances of professional practice, offering insights that are not typically available in more traditional academic settings.

By incorporating VET schools into the consortium of virtual internship providers, the program significantly broadens its appeal and utility, catering to a wider array of vocational interests and expanding the practical application of learned skills. This holistic approach ensures that interns receive a comprehensive educational experience that combines theoretical knowledge from universities, cutting-edge technology from tech companies, and practical skills from vocational training, making them well-prepared for the demands of the modern workforce.



Virtual internships in Spain were fully virtual, maximizing the flexibility for participants and reducing the logistical barriers associated with traditional internships. However, some programs also offer a hybrid model after initial participation in the program, with further connection between participants and internship providers, where critical hands-on or networking activities are conducted in-person, complementing the online components.

In conclusion, virtual internship programs in Spain are designed to provide a comprehensive, flexible, and deeply engaging learning experience. They prepare participants for the challenges of modern professional environments through a curriculum that blends academic rigor with practical application, supported by a robust network of providers and mentors. These programs not only enhance specific professional skills but also cultivate a broader understanding of the global digital workplace.

The selection process for virtual internships in Spain is intricately designed to identify candidates who excel both academically and in practical skills, making them well-suited for the dynamic demands of remote work. This comprehensive process is segmented into multiple phases to ensure a thorough evaluation of each candidate:

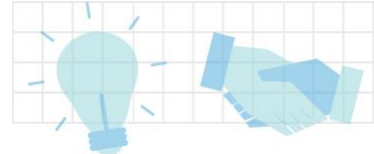
- Initial screening: Candidates' resumes and cover letters are reviewed to assess their educational background, prior work experience, and involvement in extracurricular activities that demonstrate relevant skills and initiative. For VET school students, particular attention is given to hands-on projects and applied learning experiences that showcase their technical competencies.
- Academic performance review: Transcripts and academic records from both traditional universities and VET schools are scrutinized to evaluate candidates' intellectual rigor and dedication to their field of study. Special emphasis is placed on coursework and projects that align with the internship's focus area, ensuring that candidates have a solid foundation in both theoretical and applied aspects of their discipline.
- Skill assessments: Applicants may need to complete specific skill-based assessments, which could include practical tasks, problem-solving exercises, or technical tests pertinent to the internship field. These assessments aim to measure both their theoretical knowledge and practical abilities, with a unique focus on the hands-on skills that VET students bring to the table.
- Interviews: This crucial phase may involve multiple rounds, including behavioral interviews to gauge candidates' teamwork and leadership qualities, as well as technical interviews that assess their professional competencies. Situational interviews are also conducted to understand how candidates would manage the specific challenges of a remote work environment. VET students are often questioned on their practical experiences and how they've applied their vocational training in real-world scenarios.
- Adaptability tests: Given the virtual nature of the internships, all candidates, including those from VET schools, undergo assessments designed to evaluate their adaptability to remote working conditions. This includes assessing their self-motivation, time management skills, and proficiency with digital communication tools.

The demographic profile of participants in Spain's virtual internships is diverse and inclusive, reflecting the ethos of these programs:

- Age Range: Targets individuals aged between 18 to 30, encompassing both university students and VET school attendees who are looking to enhance their skills or shift their career paths.



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- **Educational Background:** Participants come from a wide range of academic disciplines including business, engineering, IT, marketing, healthcare, and the social sciences, as well as from vocational fields such as automotive technology, culinary arts, and construction. This diversity enriches the learning environment by bringing various perspectives and practical problem-solving approaches.
- **Socio-Economic Diversity:** The programs strive to level the playing field for individuals from underprivileged backgrounds, which includes reaching out to VET students who may lack the resources to participate in traditional internships. This effort is supported by providing necessary technological tools or software, and in some cases, stipends.
- **International and Cultural Inclusion:** The virtual format allows the inclusion of not only Spanish nationals but also international candidates, fostering a multicultural environment where participants can gain global perspectives and networking opportunities.
- **Accessibility:** Special efforts are made to ensure that these internships are accessible to individuals with disabilities, with all tools and learning platforms being compliant with accessibility standards. This includes personalized support systems designed to help these participants fully engage with all aspects of the internship.

Through these comprehensive selection processes and the inclusive demographic profile of the participants, virtual internships in Spain are designed to foster a dynamic and diverse workforce prepared to tackle the challenges of the global market. These programs not only serve as a stepping stone for young talents to enhance their skills and careers but also as a platform for promoting inclusivity and equal opportunities in professional development.

### *Lessons learned and recommendations*

The implementation of virtual internships across various sectors in Spain has yielded critical insights into the operational and strategic facets of remote education and professional development. These insights not only highlight the challenges faced but also underscore the significant advantages that these programs bring to the educational landscape and the workforce. Here's a deeper exploration of these key learnings:

#### **1. Technological accessibility:**

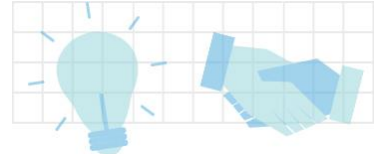
One of the most prominent challenges identified during the implementation of virtual internships is ensuring equitable access to the necessary technological resources. This challenge is twofold:

- **Infrastructure availability:** Not all participants have equal access to high-speed internet and advanced computing equipment. This disparity can affect the quality of the remote learning experience and may hinder the full participation of some interns, particularly those from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Digital divide mitigation strategies:** To address these disparities, programs have implemented several strategies such as providing portable internet devices, subsidizing broadband access, and loaning laptops to participants who need them. Additionally, training sessions on technology use and troubleshooting are conducted to ensure all participants can navigate the digital tools effectively.



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## 2. Skill application and development:

Virtual internships have been pivotal in enhancing critical job-related skills, catering to the demands of the digital economy. The specific areas of skill development observed include:

- **Analytical thinking and problem-solving:** Participants engage in complex project-based tasks that require them to analyze data, identify patterns, and propose viable solutions to real-world problems. This not only enhances their analytical capabilities but also equips them with the confidence to handle similar challenges in their future careers.
- **Digital literacy and technical proficiency:** As all tasks and communications are conducted via digital platforms, interns significantly improve their digital literacy. From mastering industry-specific software to adopting advanced digital communication tools, interns leave the program with a robust set of digital skills that are highly valued in today's job market.
- **Adaptability and remote work skills:** The virtual setting of the internships inherently teaches participants how to work effectively in a remote environment. Skills such as time management, self-discipline, virtual collaboration, and remote project management are cultivated, preparing participants for the flexible work models increasingly prevalent in global industries.

## 3. Enhancement of inclusive educational practices:

Virtual internships have underscored the importance of inclusive educational practices. These programs have made strides in:

- **Customizing learning experiences:** Understanding that each participant has unique needs, programs have adapted to provide personalized mentorship and learning paths. This approach helps accommodate various learning styles and paces, ensuring that all participants can benefit equally from the internship experience.
- **Fostering a global perspective:** By allowing participation from a geographically diverse group, virtual internships facilitate a multicultural educational environment. This diversity enriches the learning experience, as participants are exposed to different global perspectives and practices, enhancing their cultural competence and global awareness.

Drawing from the collective experiences and valuable feedback from earlier iterations of virtual internship programs, a comprehensive set of recommendations is proposed to elevate the effectiveness and expand the reach of these initiatives. These recommendations aim to address the identified challenges and capitalize on the opportunities that virtual internships offer in the evolving educational and professional environments.

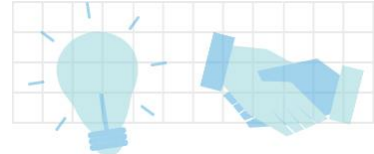
## 1. Enhance technological infrastructure:

A foundational aspect of improving virtual internships is the enhancement of technological support for all participants. This includes:

- **Subsidized connectivity solutions:** Offering subsidized or free high-speed internet access to ensure that all interns, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can participate effectively without technological hindrances.



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- Provision of necessary hardware: Deploying loaner programs that provide laptops, headphones, and other essential hardware to interns who lack the necessary equipment can help level the playing field and ensure a uniform experience for all.
- Robust IT support: Establishing a dedicated IT support team to assist interns with any technical issues that arise during their internship can minimize downtime and enhance productivity.

## 2. Diversification of internship opportunities:

Expanding the scope and variety of internship opportunities available can attract a broader demographic and provide relevant skills across diverse sectors. This includes:

- Industry expansion: Introducing virtual internships in emerging fields such as green technologies, digital health, and creative industries can cater to a wider range of interests and career aspirations.
- Cross-Disciplinary projects: Developing projects that require cross-disciplinary skills and collaboration between different sectors can enrich the learning experience and prepare interns for the interconnected nature of modern industries.

## 3. Improvement in mentorship and support:

Mentorship is a critical component of any internship program. Enhancing this element can significantly improve the learning outcomes and satisfaction of interns:

- Structured mentorship programs: Implementing structured mentorship programs that include regular scheduled check-ins, goal-setting sessions, and personalized career guidance.
- Training for mentors: Providing training for mentors on best practices in virtual communication, feedback delivery, and cultural competency to ensure they are well-equipped to support a diverse group of interns.

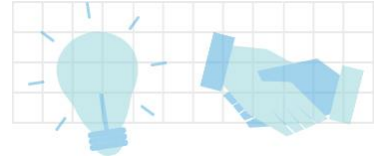
## 4. Regular feedback and dynamic adaptation:

Incorporating a systematic feedback mechanism is essential for the continuous improvement of the internship programs:

- Real-Time feedback channels: Establishing channels through which interns can provide immediate feedback on their experiences and challenges. This could include regular surveys, feedback forms, or virtual focus groups.
- Adaptive program design: Using the feedback collected to make dynamic adjustments to the internship program. This could involve adapting the curriculum, modifying project timelines, or offering additional support where needed.



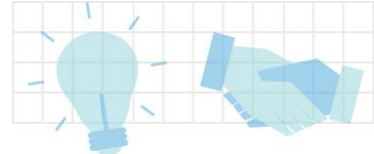
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## 5. Example of good practice:

One exemplary model of virtual internships can be seen in a program that partnered with a multinational corporation to provide global market insights and hands-on experience in international business strategies. This program offered:

- Global virtual teams: Interns worked in virtual teams with peers from different countries, enhancing their cultural awareness and global collaboration skills.
- Live business challenges: Interns were tasked with solving real-time business challenges faced by the company, providing them with hands-on experience and valuable insights into the complexities of global business operations.



## 5. KEY LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implementation of virtual internship programs in Italy, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Spain has provided valuable insights and recommendations. Each country faced unique challenges and opportunities, leading to specific conclusions and suggestions.

In Italy, a hybrid model of in-person and online activities was preferred, especially in the agri-food sector. North Macedonia dealt with high dropout rates due to platform issues and lack of remuneration, highlighting the need for financial incentives and improved digital tools. Serbia benefited from geographic flexibility and digital skill development, though technical resource access was uneven. Spain's program emphasized flexible, work-relevant experiences, despite technological accessibility challenges. Key recommendations include adapting programs to local contexts, enhancing technological infrastructure, providing mentor training, and expanding internship opportunities, including international exchanges. These findings offer a roadmap for refining virtual internships to meet diverse regional needs.

### *Italy*

#### **Key Conclusions**

- The hybrid internship model (combination of in-person and online activities) was preferred over fully virtual to overcome skepticism from companies.
- The use of the Chamilo platform enabled good communication and monitoring of interns.
- Feedback from interns was encouraging, highlighting the usefulness of the virtual component and their involvement in activities.
- The need to find a balance between online and in-person activities emerged, especially for interns in the agri-food sector.

#### **Recommendations**

- Continuous assessment of the national context needs to adapt the program.
- Consider regional differences to personalize programs.
- Cultivate lasting partnerships with companies to align activities with their needs.
- Expand the program by involving more interns and companies in different Italian regions.

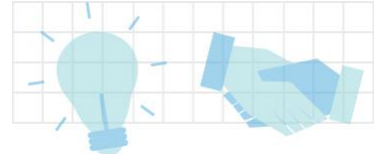
### *North Macedonia*

#### **Key Conclusions**

- Initially, 15 legal entities applied as internship providers, but only 10 actively participated.
- The selection prioritized young people under 30 and from rural areas.
- Over 90% of interns were university or final year high school students.
- Some difficulties with the online platform and lack of remuneration led to a high dropout rate.



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### **Recommendations**

- Provide training to legal entities to enhance their role as mentors.
- Consider remuneration for interns to incentivize their engagement.
- Offer international exchange opportunities between interns and providers.
- Improve communication channels and technical support.
- Implement feedback mechanisms to improve the program.
- Conduct regular evaluations to monitor effectiveness.

### **Serbia**

#### **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.

#### **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.

### **Spain**

#### **Key Conclusions**

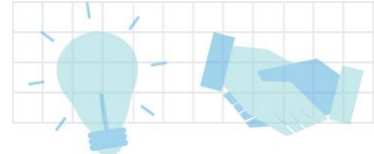
- Virtual internship programs offer a flexible and work-relevant learning experience.
- The consortium of providers and mentors (universities, tech companies, vocational training schools) enriches the experience.
- Main challenges relate to technological accessibility and the digital divide.
- Virtual internships promote the development of digital, problem-solving, and remote work adaptability skills.

#### **Recommendations**

- Enhance technological infrastructure by offering subsidized connectivity and hardware.
- Diversify internship opportunities in emerging sectors and interdisciplinary projects.
- Implement structured mentorship programs and mentor training.
- Establish real-time feedback channels and an adaptive program design.
- Promote global virtual teams and concrete business challenges for an immersive experience.



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In summary, key recommendations include continuous adaptation of programs to national context needs, personalization for different regions, improvement of technological infrastructure, training for mentors and providers, introduction of feedback mechanisms, and expansion of internship opportunities into new sectors and international contexts.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The VI4IS Project implemented virtual internship programs across Italy, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Spain. In Italy and Spain, hybrid models combining online and in-person components were most effective. North Macedonia and Serbia utilized fully virtual approaches. While enhancing digital skills, the programs faced challenges like technology access gaps and need for clearer mentorship. However, tailoring supports and applying feedback allowed the programs to promote inclusive professional development for diverse young people, including those from rural areas. By continuously adapting its flexible model, the VI4IS Project demonstrated the potential of virtual internships to provide valuable practical learning aligning with sectoral needs.

