National Youth Council of Macedonia

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VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS FOR INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

GUIDLINE
FOR INITIALIZING
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS
IN NORTH MACEDONIA

30 YEARS

BOS
BELGRADE
OPEN
SCHOOL

JA Europe
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JA Worldwide

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The main goal of the Virtual Internships 4 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.

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Introduction

As the traditional boundaries of work and education evolve, virtual internships offer a unique opportunity to bridge geographical gaps, accommodate diverse schedules, and foster meaningful connections in the digital landscape. This guide aims to provide a structured approach to designing, implementing, and optimizing virtual internships, ensuring that both interns and host organizations reap the benefits of this modern approach to experiential learning.

In North Macedonia, internships are an essential part of both formal and non-formal education. They provide students and young professionals with practical, on-the-job training in real work settings. Through internships, individuals have the chance to apply their knowledge, develop relevant skills, and experience the professional world. These experiences aim to prepare them for the challenges and demands of their chosen career paths, contributing to a well-prepared and competent workforce in the country. In terms of internships in North Macedonia, and how they are regulated, it's imperative to note that North Macedonia has

regulated internships in a Law since 2019.[1]

"Internship" is a work activity that includes a work-through component learning and acquiring practical work skills, which is realized in a limited period of time, six months

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[1] Law on Internships (''Official Gazette of the RNM'', No. 98/2019)

maximum, in order to gain practical and professional experience and to further improve employability and help the transition towards regular employment. The law itself differentiates the term internship with volunteering activity and trial work in accordance with the Law on Labor Relations, as well as training and retraining in accordance with the Law on Employment and insurance in case of unemployment. The term "Internship" is further defined as a limited period of time that one person is spending as an intern at the chosen employer.

"Intern" is a person who performs an internship with a chosen employer for the purpose of acquiring practical knowledge and skills that will help him/her improve their employability and the transition towards the labor market. According to the Law on Internships, an intern can be any person who is a citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia, who meets the conditions determined by this law. As for the conditions for one to be an intern, he/she should fulfill the following conditions: not to be employed, not to be older than 34 years of age and to have completed at least elementary school. The duration of an internship with one employer may amount up to six months, and the internship can only be done once by the same person with the same employer. The internship contract can be signed on a full-time basis or part-time, according to the needs and will of the both parties. The employer is obliged to keep records of the intern's working hours.

According to the Law on Internships, the amount of the monthly compensation is determined in net amount for full-time work, depending on the duration, i.e. period of the internship, and it varies from 42% to 74% of the minimum net salary in the country, If the internship, in accordance with the internship agreement, is realized in a period that is shorter than full-time, the remuneration is calculated in proportion to the time spent on the internship. According to this article, the interns must be paid accordingly for their work, thus forbidding unpaid internships to be forced by the employers in the country.

State of art regarding virtual internships in North Macedonia

A large number of young people face challenges in employment, as a result of the low quality of education and inconsistency of education, including vocational education and training, with the needs of the labor market. After all, for young people, unemployment still remains the biggest problem. Although the unemployment rate among young people is continuously decreasing and records a drop of close to 10% in the last few years, from 39.2% in 2017 to 25.2% in 2022,[2] North Macedonia remains one of the countries with the highest youth unemployment rate in

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[2] chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2023/2.1.23.05_mk.pdf

Europe. In addition, young people are almost twice as likely to be unemployed compared to the other age categories, and every third young person is exposed to the risk of poverty and social exclusion - especially those young people who come from families with a lower socioeconomic status and from rural areas. The data shows that more than one third of young people in the country fall into the category of persons who are neither employed nor involved in education/training (NEET).

The state undertakes various measures to reduce unemployment, including the internship measure, foreseen in the operational plan for active programs and measures for employment and services on the labor market of the Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia[3]. According to the annual report of the Employment Agency for 2022, a total of 1379 young people up to 29 years of age were included in the internship measure[4].

In addition to the measures taken by the state and the civil sector in North Macedonia, it is actively working to provide space and activities that lead to the reduction of youth unemployment through internship programs. The National

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[3] https://av.gov.mk/content/pdf/FINALEN%20OP%202022.pdf

[4] https://av.gov.mk/content/Dokumenti/%D0%98%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%98%20%D0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%90%D0%92%D0%A0%D0%A1%D0%9C%202022%20-%20%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%BE.doc

Youth Council of Macedonia has introduced the Mladi Hub project, which recently opened applications for internships providing financial support to 100 young individuals. The internship program spans two months, and the council will match the interns with suitable legal entities based on their preferences and interests. Successful applicants will receive a monthly net compensation of MKD 12,500 (approximately 200 EUR). Eligibility for the program requires participants to be between 16 and 29 years old, not currently employed, to have completed at least primary education, and to commit to a two-month internship with a designated legal entity. The interns were chosen according to an equal representation of young people from different regions of the country, taking into account the gender factor - all with the aim of all young people getting internships on an equal basis.

As of the current status, virtual internships in North Macedonia are not widely available and remain significantly limited. Unlike their traditional counterparts, which involve physical presence at a workplace, virtual internships have not yet gained substantial traction in the country. The concept of remote internships, where participants can work from home or any remote location, is not prevalent in the local internship landscape. In North Macedonia, virtual internships are not something that is offered on the market, thus, they are not very much present and available.

The closest we've got is one opportunity called "Mentored distant internship/practice" offered by the Marijanovikj Education. Mentored distance internship/practice is a commercial service of Marjanović Education that will enable students from technical faculties to follow practical teaching from home under the guidance of experienced mentors who will monitor their progress, evaluate their work and transfer their experience to the most efficient possible way. The internship/practice is composed of three parts: theoretical part, practical part, and mentoring sessions. By participating in practical remote teaching under the guidance of a mentor, students are also preparing for a completely new way of working - remotely. In the same way as in the case of distance practice, in which the received tasks have to be created and sent to the mentor, the students will work for their clients in the future. For the implementation of the mentored practice, "Marjanovic Education" has received consent from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia (No. 20-7514/2 of 4/7/2015) and signed a memorandum of cooperation with technical and informatics faculties.

Additionally, the "Choosing the Best Student Company" competition, organized by Junior Achievement from Skopje, saw participation from 52 high schools vying to develop the most innovative student company. Notably, students from the high school "Vasil Antevski - Dren" created a remarkable platform in the form of a video game, facilitating virtual practice and internships. The game offered students an

immersive experience in managing their own businesses through realistic simulations. Moreover, the application featured an educational corner covering essential business concepts, including microtransactions, financing, and insights into cryptocurrencies. Recognizing its ingenuity, the students' creation secured an impressive third-place position in the competition.

In addition to these accomplishments, North Macedonia also witnessed the Virtual Internship Fair, held from May 16th to 18th, 2022. This three-day event, organized by bintern.com, the pioneering Macedonian platform connecting companies with young talent for internships and employment, aimed to foster connections between students and graduates with potential employers from all across the country. The fair served as a pivotal opportunity for aspiring professionals to explore internship and job prospects, further reinforcing North Macedonia's commitment to nurturing talent and providing invaluable learning experiences for its youth.

The internship/practice were aimed to target young people, students who are in the process of higher education. Unfortunately, there is no information provided about the need for inclusion of a specific group of students, nor is there a specific rationale why that is.

During the National Foras discussion on the availability of virtual internships in our country, a significant number of

participants admitted to not knowing specific organizations or institutions that offer such opportunities. However, many assume that those providing virtual internships are likely to be closely associated with the IT sector.

Overview of opportunities and obstacles for developing virtual internships in North Macedonia

During the National Foras discussion numerous participants expressed the belief that various industries have the potential to incorporate virtual internships, albeit not necessarily in their entirety. Many noted that certain aspects or segments of different fields could be effectively shifted. The experience of working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic was acknowledged as a collective glimpse into the possibilities of virtual work arrangements, prompting a realization that adapting to virtual environments is feasible. However, some participants held divided views on whether every industry can incorporate fully virtual internships. For instance, the food industry was cited as an example where complete virtualization might not be completely possible due to its inherent nature of physical food preparation and consumption. Nevertheless, the prevailing sentiment among participants was that while not all industries might be entirely possible to provide virtual internships, embracing virtual elements can foster innovation and efficiency across diverse sectors.

Based on the various discussions at the national Forums, a series of opportunities can be presented that can positively impact both students/young people and organizations through the implementation of virtual internships.

- Increased Reach: Virtual internships offer the potential to reach a broader pool of students across the country. Geographical barriers are minimized, allowing students from different regions to access internship opportunities that were previously limited to specific locations. Here, especially we refer to the rural youth and those who are practically unavailable to travel to the place of work on a daily basis.

- Flexibility for Students: The remote nature of virtual internships allows students to balance their academic commitments with practical work experience. They can participate in internships without disrupting their regular study routines, enhancing their overall learning experience. Conducting an internship and maintaining the academic commitments can be very challenging, and at the end it can result in less efficiency because the student will simply lost her or himself in the process because of the inability to devote themselves equally to both university and workplace - which will ultimately result in lower

results, whether academically or during the internship.

- Diverse Learning Environments: This can both have positive and negative impact. When something new is offered, it does not always guarantee a negative impact. Diverse learning environments may have been challenging but they can also serve as an opportunity. This can foster adaptability and versatility in their skillset.

- Cross-Cultural Experience: Interning with international organizations remotely can provide students with valuable cross-cultural experiences, allowing them to understand global work dynamics and build global networks.

- Skill Development: Virtual internships can emphasize the development of essential remote work skills, such as time management, self-discipline, and adaptability, which are becoming increasingly relevant in the modern job market. Even though we've identified as an obstacle the possibility of losing the soft skills, we do believe that these skills that can be acquired are also of immense importance.

- Cost-Effective for Organizations: Hosting virtual interns can be cost-effective for organizations as they save on expenses related to office space, equipment, and other logistical aspects associated with in-person internships. But, it does not mean that those organizations who wish to conduct a virtual internship are not coming with a cost. We believe that the possible cost can be in line with the need to invest in technology and infrastructure, in order to facilitate virtual internships. This includes providing software licenses, virtual meeting platforms, cloud storage, and equipment such as laptops or tablets for interns who do not have their own. Interns should not be responsible in any case to be left to provide their own technical equipment - but rather the employee should be responsible for that.

- Virtual internships can enhance productivity: With virtual internships, interns can work in familiar and comfortable environments, which may enhance their productivity and creativity. The choice as such that is given to the interns to basically choose their environment in which they're going to do the work, can indeed enhance and influence the behavior, their mood and therefore contribute towards better productivity.

- Adaptable Learning: Educational institutions can partner with organizations to offer virtual internships as part of their curriculum. This allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings while gaining exposure to remote work dynamics.

Obstacles we've identified in regards to virtual internships in a national context are the following:

- Limited Hands-On Experience: Virtual internships may not provide the same level of hands-on experience as the conventional in-person internships. The physical presence in a workplace allows the interns to directly engage with the company's culture, colleagues, and the work per se, which might be more challenging in a remote setting. Certain industries and fields may require hands-on skill development, that is better suited to the conventional and already well known in-person internships - and virtual internships might not adequately address these specific needs.
  It can be challenging for interns to fully immerse themselves in the company culture and understand the organization's values and norms without being physically present. That can be because many companies and organizations in North Macedonia might still adhere to traditional/conventional work

practices, where in-person presence is considered essential for collaboration and communication.

- Communication and Collaboration Challenges: Remote work relies heavily on digital communication tools, which can sometimes lead towards possible miscommunication or difficulties in establishing strong working relationships between interns and their employers.

- Technology Limitations: Not all interns or organizations may have access to the necessary technology or stable internet connections required for virtual work. Technical issues could hinder productivity and communication during the internship period.

- Company Size and Structure: Smaller companies or organizations with limited resources and capacities might find it more challenging to offer and manage virtual internships effectively, which is why there can be backlash.

- Isolation and Social Interaction: Working remotely may be isolating, especially for interns who value social interactions and networking. The lack of face-to-face interactions may impact very much the team dynamics and the sense of belonging within the

organization, to the point that the intern may feel like he/she does not belong in that particular community.

- Evaluating Performance: Assessing interns' performance and progress in a virtual environment might require a different approach than traditional evaluation, as it can be harder to gauge soft skills and teamwork abilities. One must ask here if the communication skills of the intern should be taken into account, given the fact that the intern is not going to communicate and have conversations with the co-workers on a daily basis.

- Limited Awareness and Promotion: This obstacle we're finding to be very much applicable in our national context. The concept of virtual internships as such is not widely known or well-promoted among educational institutions and students, nor is it among the employees. The lack of awareness can result in a lower number of applicants and organizations offering such opportunities. And because of this, we cannot see the reason why one should exit the bubble of convenient and conventional internship set-up, just to offer something innovative, that can maybe cost them time loss and resources spent in vain - on the expense of lack of knowledge.

- Supervision and Support: Providing adequate supervision and support to virtual interns might require additional efforts and resources from the hosting organizations, to ensure that interns receive the guidance they need, and to further secure the feeling that they have a mentor that is guiding them accordingly, ensuring that they do not feel misguided during their internship.

Practical steps to start and develop a Virtual Internship

The complete analysis as well as the experiences and discussions from the realized national forums definitely highlight that virtual internships can be a great way to provide valuable learning experiences to aspiring professionals, even when in-person opportunities may not be available. In conclusion, based on all of this, the basic and practical steps for development and implementation of a quality program for virtual internships can be stated:

- **Defined goals and roles:** Having well-defined objectives for the virtual internship program, along with a precise outline of the skills, knowledge, and experiences interns should gain, forms the fundamental foundation for a successful and high-quality program

implementation. This clarity sets the direction for both the interns and the organization, ensuring everyone knows what they're working towards and what they're expected to achieve. This can be achieved by conducting a thorough analysis of the organization's needs and through identification of specific areas in which interns can contribute. Clearly articulated objectives of the program, such as skill development, project completion, or research support can be a good starting point, ensuring that these goals align with the organization's overall mission and objectives in the Macedonian context.

- **Developed internship job descriptions:** Drafting comprehensive internship descriptions that specify the assignments and projects interns will undertake is crucial. It provides a clear view of the necessary qualifications, what's expected of the intern, and the time investment required to complete tasks. This clarity aids in finding the right candidates and setting realistic expectations for the role. This can be achieved through creating detailed job descriptions for each internship position, outlining specific tasks, responsibilities, and expected outcomes. Furthermore, the description should clearly state the qualifications, skills, and knowledge

required. Consideration of using local job boards, university career centers, and professional networks in the country to advertise these positions can be helpful.

- **Setting up and enabling a virtual workspace:** Selecting the right virtual platform for communication and collaboration is a critical step in the success of virtual internships. This platform enables the smooth interaction between interns and team members. It's essential to choose a platform/s that is widely available and dependable in North Macedonia. Popular options like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Workspace are recommended. To ensure seamless use of these tools, interns should be provided with access and training. This will equip them with the necessary skills to effectively utilize the chosen platform. Additionally, consider offering technical support to address any connectivity issues that may arise during the internship period. This approach guarantees that interns can engage and contribute without unnecessary technical hurdles.
- **Designing a structured program**: Creating a well-organized internship program with defined timelines and milestones, along with scheduled check-ins, progress assessments, and feedback

sessions, is crucial to keep interns motivated and on course. To implement this, organizations and/or businesses should start by crafting a detailed program schedule that outlines specific milestones and deadlines. Organizations and/or businesses should consider arranging regular check-in meetings with interns to review progress, address any queries, and offer constructive feedback. Using project management tools like Trello or Asana can be highly effective in tracking progress and facilitating seamless communication for sharing updates. This approach ensures that interns stay engaged and aligned with the program's objectives.

- **Providing orientation and training:** At the start of the internship, kicking off with a comprehensive orientation is crucial. This session acquaints interns with the organization, its core values, and what's expected of them. Additionally, providing training on any specific software or tools they'll be using is essential for their success in the role. To put this into action, conduct a virtual orientation session will give interns a clear understanding of the organization's culture, values, and expectations.

- **Assignment of significant projects and tasks:** Assigning interns to substantial, real-world

projects that directly impact the organization's objectives is a key element. These projects offer interns challenging tasks, allowing them to apply their existing skills and acquire new ones. To implement this, carefully pair interns with projects that match their skills and cater to their individual interests. It's vital to establish clear project objectives, outline expected outcomes, and specify deliverables. Additionally, organizations should promote collaboration among interns and team members, cultivating a sense of ownership and meaningful contribution.

- **Mentoring and support**: Ensuring every intern has a designated mentor or supervisor is crucial for their success. This mentorship provides essential guidance and support throughout the internship, creating an environment where interns feel comfortable seeking help and communicating openly. To implement this, organizations should match each intern with a mentor. The mentor's role is to offer guidance, address any questions, and provide constructive feedback on performance. Encourage consistent communication between mentors and interns to foster a supportive atmosphere for professional growth. This

approach establishes a valuable support system for interns to thrive in their roles.

- **Feedback and Continuous improvement**: Regularly evaluating interns' performance and providing constructive feedback will let interns know that their work and assigned tasks are important to the organization and are regularly monitored. Feedback from the intern is also important in this process, so that the employee can gain insight into the intern's experience and gather suggestions for improving the entire program. After the internship program ends, gathering feedback from interns, mentors, and supervisors is important to identify areas of improvement for future virtual internships.

By meticulously following the comprehensive steps outlined in this guide, we believe that it is not only feasible, but highly plausible to create and implement a well-crafted, successful, and truly enriching virtual internship program. Such a structured program has the potential to bring significant benefits not only to the host organization, but also to the interns who become integral participants in this innovative and transformative experience.