

# YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY – KEY POLICY CHALLENGES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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– KEY POLICY  
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**Y**oung people in the Western Balkan countries face numerous difficulties in the process of transition from education to the labour market. One of the key barriers they encounter is the lack of skills that would help them navigate through the modern and dynamic world of work and obtain a favourable job.

Three types of services have been identified as particularly significant in supporting youth employability and developing much-needed skills: **career guidance, traineeships and employability skills training**. Previous research studies<sup>1</sup> indicate that they could be effective in improving skills and their importance has been recognized in relevant strategic documents.<sup>2</sup>

The civil society organizations that work with young people in the Western Balkan region are often involved in the area of youth employability as service providers<sup>3</sup> – delivering career guidance services and employability skills training, and mediating between employers and young people in organizing traineeships. Apart from providing services, civil society organizations can provide significant input in decision- and policy-making processes. The role of civil society organizations in providing services for improving youth skills, and their experience in working directly with young people should be recognized and used to feed into policy documents. This document **reviews the key youth employability policy challenges** based on the comparative analysis, with the aim to map the areas of potential **cooperation between civil society organizations and public institutions in the Western Balkans** and thus contribute to alleviating youth unemployment.

**Desk research was carried out** in the process of data collection, followed by **consultations with relevant stakeholders** individually and within the National Fora on Youth Employment established under this project in each of the countries as platforms for structural dialogue among key stakeholders in the field. Within the Regional Forum on Youth Employment organized in Skopje from 20 to 21 June 2018, the findings and recommendations of this document were discussed by more than 70 representatives of public institutions, business sector and civil society organizations dealing with youth employment from the Western Balkans.

Based on the analytical report and regional and national consultations with key stakeholders, **five key policy challenges**

in this area relevant to all Western Balkan countries have been articulated:

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- # 1. Young people do not have access to quality career services that would help them acquire career management skills.
  - # 2. The lack of coordination and cooperation among the key stakeholders hinders young people from easily identifying which career guidance services are available to them.
  - # 3. Youth access to reliable career-related information is limited.
  - # 4. The quality of traineeships undertaken by young people is not ensured.
  - # 5. Training on youth employability skills is not fully utilized.
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Following the review of the challenges is the set of recommendations for cooperation between public institutions and civil society organizations at the national and regional level.

# # 1. Young people do not have access to quality career services that would help them acquire career management skills.

In order to make career decisions and manage transitions between education, training and employment opportunities,<sup>4</sup> it is vital for young people to develop **career management skills**. In other words, they need skills to gather information regarding their capacities, competences and interests, to determine their education pathways and occupations, and to analyse and organise that information.

**However, many young people in the Western Balkans are still not involved in career guidance services (career information, career counselling and career education) which would help them obtain required skills.** For example, around two-thirds of young people in Serbia report that they have not been involved in career guidance services.<sup>5</sup> The conclusion of the recent report on career guidance in Albania<sup>6</sup> is that there is "only limited and fragmented understanding of career guidance concept" and that it is neither well represented in the curriculum nor sufficiently available to students of public universities.

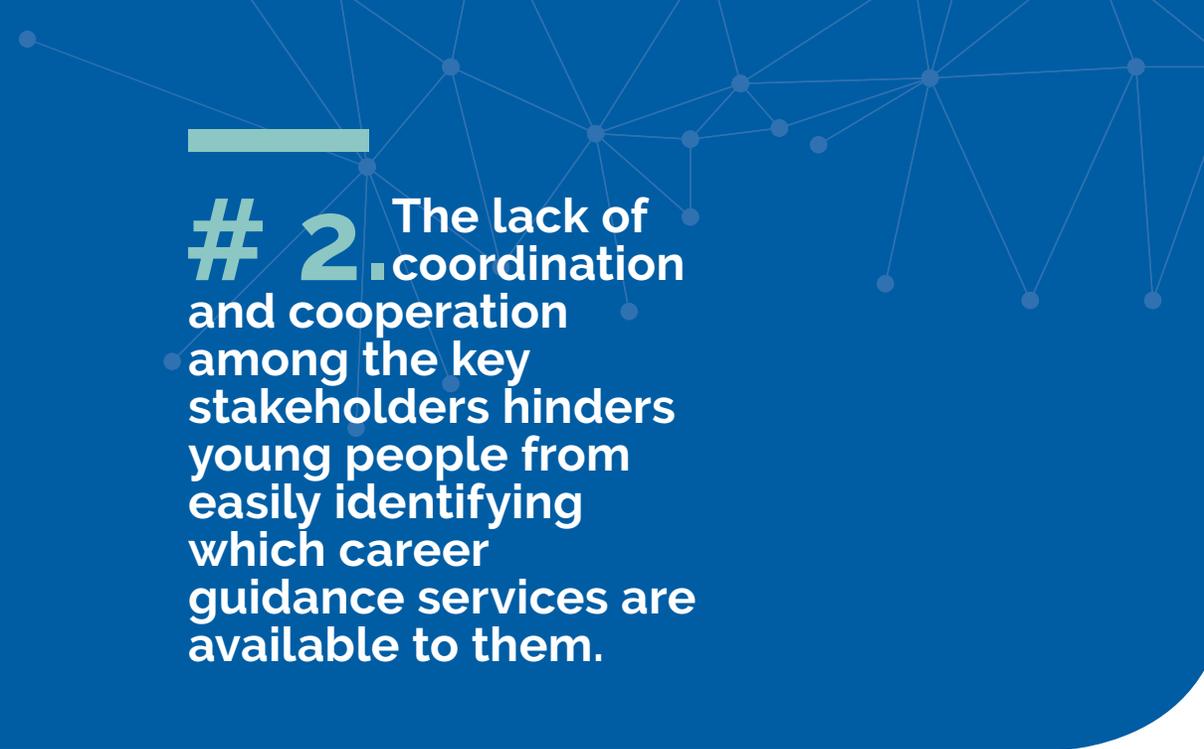
In addition to the availability of career guidance services, their quality also poses a challenge. Quality assurance has been defined as a priority in strategic documents in some countries. However, in most of the Western Balkan countries **there is no established mechanism for ensuring the quality of services, particularly for ensuring that young people who receive those services actually do develop career management skills.**

Quality assurance has been set as a priority in strategic documents in Montenegro and in one of the political entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). Their strategic documents lay down specific steps to be undertaken to establish quality standards for all service providers. In Serbia, the quality standards have recently been developed by the Working Group comprising representatives of key stakeholders.

Although the absence of quality assurance has also been noted in other countries, the development of quality standards has not been put on their agenda. For instance, it has been emphasized that no evaluation is carried out for the career guidance module, which is an extracurricular activity for students in the last grade of compulsory education in Albania<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, it has been recognized that the main mechanism for monitoring and ensuring the quality of services available in the FYR Macedonia<sup>8</sup> is the measuring of the number of users reached and that the overall quality framework is missing. The situation regarding the quality of career guidance services calls for the establishment of standards in this area.

Young people from remote and rural areas find it particularly challenging to access support in career guidance. For example, as our consultations revealed, young people from such areas in Kosovo have difficulty accessing career centres as they are located only in university centres.





## # 2. The lack of coordination and cooperation among the key stakeholders hinders young people from easily identifying which career guidance services are available to them.

Even though there are various institutions involved in career guidance provision, there are no **established and effective mechanisms for coordination and communication among them**. These mechanisms are crucial both from the perspective of policy – to avoid policy fragmentation and duplication of effort, and from the perspective of young people – to easily identify what is available to them.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, they are particularly important where a coordinated response from multiple providers is needed, such in the case of providing guidance to young people not in employment, education or training.

Each of the Western Balkan countries **has specific institutions in charge of youth career guidance**. In all countries, they include the ministry in charge of education and the ministry in charge of employment, while in some countries certain responsibilities in this area are undertaken by institutions in charge of youth and educational institutions. In some cases, institutions at the local level and youth offices also have a role. Moreover, Euroguidance centres have been established in Serbia, Montenegro and FYR Macedonia for the purpose of promoting the European dimension in guidance and providing quality information on lifelong guidance

and mobility for learning purposes. Furthermore, in most of the countries, international organizations are involved in career guidance by providing support for its development. In some cases, civil society organizations are also engaged in developing guidance policies as members of working groups and implementing them through projects.

To achieve coordination and cooperation among these various institutions, the majority of the Western Balkan countries have tested some approach. However, **attempts at establishing a mechanism for coordination of career guidance**, either through forming a new coordination body or through signing protocols of cooperation between key actors, **have not proven to be entirely effective and sustainable**. For instance, in Serbia<sup>40</sup>, the national resource centre for career counselling and guidance, whose one of the functions should have been to ensure the overall coordination of the system of career guidance and counselling, has been foreseen in the Strategy for Career Guidance but not established. Similarly, in Kosovo, the Policy Forum for Career Education and Guidance was established within the project in 2006 as a mechanism of policy coordination in career guidance. Even though this was an excellent idea, in practice, the forum did not succeed to include all stakeholders in the area of career guidance in the country<sup>41</sup>; it was project-led and sustaining the mechanism was impossible upon the finalisation of the project.

## # 3. Youth access to reliable career-related information is limited.

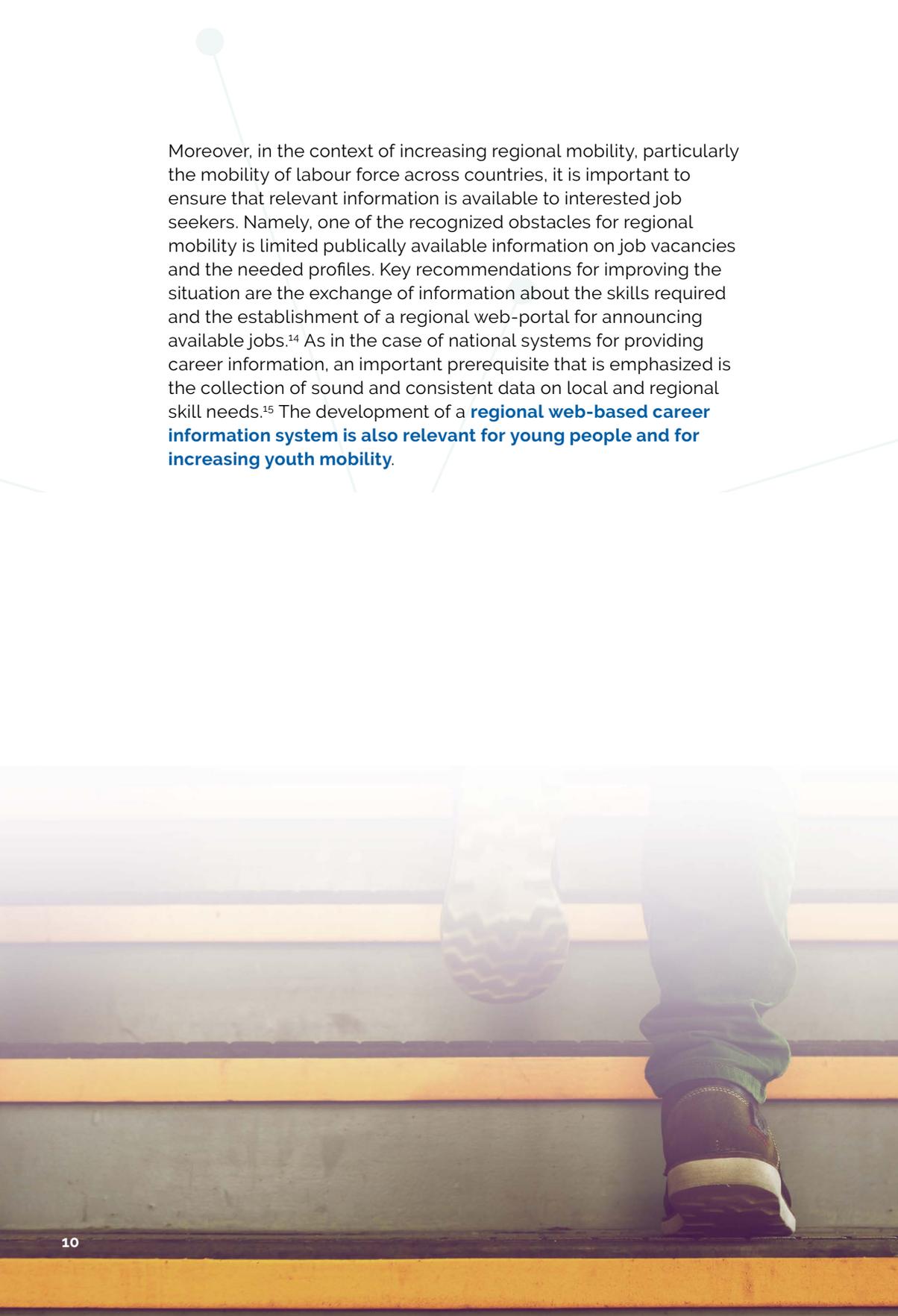
Reliable career-related information<sup>1</sup>, which is supported by evidence and derived from dependable sources, is crucial for young people and is an important prerequisite for successful realization of other career guidance services – career counselling and career education. **However, youth access to comprehensive and non-biased information is limited.** Our desk analysis has shown that, in all countries, there are some web-based and print-based materials providing information on education, training options and occupations, which are available through national employment agencies, educational institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations. However, they are not comprehensive and integrated, or delivered in a youth-friendly manner.

**Even when information exists, it is not transformed into user-friendly and usable learning material for career guidance and distributed through channels young people most frequently use.**

This is particularly worrying in the case of labour market information. For instance, the most frequently mentioned channels for the dissemination of results<sup>12</sup> on skill needs in the Western Balkan countries are reports and websites, and rarely is it the case that they are disseminated via social media. Moreover, the information obtainable through reports and websites is not presented in a youth-friendly manner. It has been noted that in Albania,<sup>13</sup> there are difficulties in translating labour market information into user-friendly career information relevant for different youth career development stages.

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1 Career-related information includes information on education and training options, education pathways and occupations, as well as labour market information (such as trends in employment and information on skills in high demand in the labour market).



Moreover, in the context of increasing regional mobility, particularly the mobility of labour force across countries, it is important to ensure that relevant information is available to interested job seekers. Namely, one of the recognized obstacles for regional mobility is limited publically available information on job vacancies and the needed profiles. Key recommendations for improving the situation are the exchange of information about the skills required and the establishment of a regional web-portal for announcing available jobs.<sup>14</sup> As in the case of national systems for providing career information, an important prerequisite that is emphasized is the collection of sound and consistent data on local and regional skill needs.<sup>15</sup> The development of a **regional web-based career information system is also relevant for young people and for increasing youth mobility.**

## # 4. The quality of traineeships undertaken by young people is not ensured.

Many young people who are trying to get a foothold in the labour market are faced with the "experience trap"; in other words, they cannot obtain their first job without previous work experience. One **way in which they can gain work experience is through traineeships** that provide them with on-the-job experience. Some young people do have the opportunity to undertake traineeships during their formal education, but this is not always the case or those traineeships do not equip them with appropriate skillset sought by employers. Therefore, there is a tendency to organize traineeships outside of the regular curriculum, which are referred to as "traineeships in the open market".

At the EU level, there is **an accepted set of quality dimensions**,<sup>16</sup> which stipulate that traineeships, including traineeships in the open market, should be based on a written agreement, that learning and training objectives should be clarified, that rights and working conditions of trainees should be respected in accordance with applicable laws, that traineeships should have a reasonable duration, that the competences acquired should be recognized and validated and that traineeship providers should include in their vacancy notices information on the terms and conditions of the traineeship.

In the Western Balkan countries, **there is a general lack of data on the number of traineeships and young people** who pursue them, and the lack of information on the quality of those traineeships. The issue of quality equally refers to traineeships in the open market and traineeships that are part of youth employability policies, whereby

there is a greater risk that the former will not provide young people with meaningful learning experience. **The available data show a worryingly low quality of traineeships overall.** In Serbia, there is an annual survey that includes a set of questions on the quality of traineeship programmes. Among the total number of young people who participated in traineeship programmes in Serbia in 2017, three-quarters of them participated in at least one programme without having signed a written contract, and according to the data from 2015, 50 per cent were without mentors.<sup>17</sup> In Montenegro, the 2014 data<sup>18</sup> on the quality of the Government traineeship programmes for higher education graduates suggest that even though the majority of young people reported having adequate learning and working conditions, it was not always the case.

One way of ensuring the quality of traineeships, besides promoting quality dimensions, is by enacting legislation or issuing guidelines to regulate the content and the implementation of traineeships. The review conducted in 2016 and presented in the *Staff Working Document on Applying the Quality Framework for Traineeships*<sup>19</sup> found that all 28 Member States have regulatory frameworks covering at least some form of traineeships outside of the regular curriculum and that eight of them have specific regulations on both ALMP-type and open market traineeships. However, none of the Western Balkan countries **has a regulatory framework for traineeships, which could also include traineeships organized in the open market.**



## # 5. Training on youth employability skills is not fully utilized.

Both employers and young people believe that **key employability skills<sup>2</sup>, which are in high demand on the labour market, are insufficiently developed through formal education.** Although the education reforms are in progress, there still will not be many opportunities for young people to improve their skills and their employment chances until these reforms have been properly implemented. **Non-formal education offers a solution** and previous research studies<sup>20</sup> indicate that there are employability skills that can be developed in this way. In particular, specific training for improving employability skills can be utilized.

The results of our desk analysis indicate that, apart from a few programmes carried out by public employment services, this type of training is **carried out by private non-formal education providers** (such as foreign language schools or IT and computer skills training providers) and **civil society organizations** working with youth (mostly aimed at the improvement of communication skills, teamwork skills, leadership, organizational and entrepreneurial skills). Unlike the programmes organized by private organizations that are expensive for some young people, the programmes offered by civil society organizations are free. Nevertheless, during our consultations, several other issues were identified, which prevent these forms of training to be fully utilized – their availability, quality and accessibility.

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- 2 Employability skills refer to the skills that enhance the ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change. They encompass skills that are important to acquire for all sectors and occupational fields: communication skills, teamwork skills, foreign language skills, desire for learning and self-improvement, IT and computer skills, ability to adapt and flexibility, problem-solving skills, work ethics, ability to work under pressure, planning and organizational skills and entrepreneurial skills.

**Training programmes for improving employability skills organized by civil society organizations working with youth are not sufficiently available.** These programmes are supported by international donors or through government funds. Namely, the training courses are organized within projects and there is often no possibility of continuation upon their conclusion, which means that they are not always available to young people.

**Another issue regards the quality of training, in particular its effectiveness, which is not always monitored.** The effectiveness should be monitored on several levels – from following the satisfaction of young people involved in the training, to determining how the training developed their skills, whether they apply them in their everyday context and whether the training led to employment. Moreover, the impact evaluation can be carried out in order to determine the effects of the training on people and society. From the aspect of policy, the verification of the quality of conducted training courses can be useful in determining whether they should be upscaled. In addition, it can help young people decide which training to take up.

Lastly, there is an issue of the **accessibility of this type of training for all groups of young people.** In particular, young people from remote and rural areas are at risk of not being included in this type of training courses, despite the fact that providing young people from rural areas with both technical and non-technical (soft) skills training has proven effective.<sup>21</sup> Another issue to be addressed is the targeting of training courses to ensure that they involve young people who are in the greatest need of developing these skills.



# Conclusions and recommendations

Youth employment is a pressing issue in the Western Balkan countries and the immense importance of improving youth employability, particularly the skills they possess, has been recognized. Namely, specific policy measures for career guidance, traineeships for young people and training on youth employability skills have been implemented and there are multiple examples of good practices in the area of youth employability, which provide a good basis for mutual cooperation.

However, there are some challenges that pose obstacles to successful implementation of youth employability policies. In the area of career guidance, they are related to insufficient cooperation and coordination among institutions involved in providing career guidance and the mechanism for ensuring the quality of the provided services. Moreover, there is a substantial lack of valuable career information that is crucial for young people to make well-informed decisions. Regarding traineeships, there is no precise data regarding the number of young people who undertake traineeships in the labour market on their own initiative in the Western Balkan countries, or data regarding their quality; therefore, there is currently insufficient information to identify gaps and design measures aimed at increasing the number of quality traineeships. An additional obstacle is the inadequate regulatory framework for traineeships in general. Finally, training for improving employability skills of young people is not fully utilized as there are issues regarding the availability, the quality and the accessibility of this measure.

Based on the identified policy issues, a broad set of **recommendations** that address them can be proposed.

*Recommendations for cooperation between public institutions and civil society organizations at the national level:*

(1) In order to avoid policy fragmentation and duplication of efforts, as well as to facilitate young people's access to career guidance services, **governments of the Western Balkan countries should adopt a decision on establishing national Working Groups** for the development of guidance policies and systems, which will gather **both government representatives from education, employment and youth policy sectors and representatives of other stakeholders**, including civil society organizations. Ministries in charge of education, employment and youth (if it exists) can take turns in convening working groups and covering the related expenses, depending on the task that the working group is in charge of.

(2) In order for all young people to have access to quality support in enhancing their career management skills, **minimum standards for career guidance services should be developed through the work of the working groups**, including all national stakeholders.

(3) In order to ensure that career-related information is accessible to young people, **a national online information system combining all available information should be set up**. Individual ministries (in charge of education, employment or youth) can directly be responsible for the production of career information or they can contract out the private sector or civil society organizations for that purpose. Young people in particular should have an active role in the production of this type of information to ensure that it is in line with their needs.

**The dissemination of existing career-related information** should be made available to young people through multiple channels, including social media, in a manner accessible to them. This can be done in cooperation with civil society organizations working with young people or delegated to them.

(4) **Public institutions should develop and/or improve the regulatory framework for traineeships in line with the quality standards** outlined in the EU Recommendation on a Quality Framework for Traineeships, which would also regulate traineeships in the open market. **Civil society organizations** can

use existing initiatives for changing labour regulations, adopting national traineeship programmes or introducing quality elements for traineeships, **to advocate the establishment of a supporting regulatory framework for all types of traineeships**, including those organized in the open market.

- **(5) Public institutions should collaborate with civil society organizations in organizing effective employability skills training (or delegate the training delivery to them).** The prerequisite is that the quality of the training is evaluated by third parties / independently from training provider organisations. The institution in charge of creating and monitoring the implementation of policy measures relating to employability skills training should commit to a target number of young people from rural and remote areas to reach out to.

*Recommendations for cooperation between public institutions and civil society organizations at the regional level:*

- **(1) A regional survey to be conducted in all Western Balkan countries should include a set of questions aimed at collecting data on the involvement of young people in traineeships and the quality of those traineeships.** This data should further be used by public institutions and civil society organizations to identify gaps and design measures aimed at increasing the offer and ensuring the quality of the traineeships offered in the open market.
- **(2) A regional web-platform that would gather information on mobility** (labour market information, conditions for youth labour mobility across the Western Balkan countries, resources in each of the Western Balkan countries intended for career development) should be established. A regional network of civil society organizations and public institutions working in this area can undertake this task.

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3 This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.