

# ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF THE NATIONAL INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME OF SERBIA

Authors: Aleksandra Djurovic, Milica Skiljevic and Ana Stevanovic  
March 2016

## Summary

Internship programmes have been recognized as one of the mechanisms for reducing the high rate of youth unemployment in Serbia and narrowing the gap between the skills that young people possess after completion of formal education and the skills which are needed on the labour market. There is a growing number of young people who participate in internship programmes organized within or outside formal education system and at the same time there is a great number of initiatives for organizing the internship programs. One of the important initiatives in this area is the establishment of the National programme of internships, which is a measure foreseen by the Action plan of the National Youth Strategy. However, the data suggests that quality problems affect a significant share of internships and at this moment there are no recommendations at the national level regarding quality standards for internships and no monitoring of their quality.

Taking into account how widespread internship programmes are at this moment and how many young people participate in these programmes, it is vital to ensure their quality through establishment of quality standards. The first step in this process should be the inclusion of quality standards in the National Internship Programme in Serbia. The recommendations are formulated for the creation of the National Internship Programme which are applicable in the short term, and the implementation of the Programme that concern the longer term.

Key words: internships, quality standards, National Internship Programme



### Belgrade open school

Masarikova 5/16  
11000 Belgrade  
Serbia

Tel: +381 11 30 65 800  
Fax: +381 11 36 13 112

www.bos.rs  
bos@bos.rs  
facebook.com/bos.rs

## **Internship programmes in Serbia - state of affairs**

The Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Serbia initiated the idea to create a National Internship Programme in Serbia as a response to the high percent of underskilled young people.

At least 2000 young people are to be included in the National Internship Programme in the period 2016-2017. This is foreseen by the Action plan of the National Youth Strategy in order to increase youth employability and employment. The key implementers will be the Ministry of Youth and Sports and The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs.

This measure has been further elaborated in the National Programme for Youth Employment 2020, which was adopted in 2015. In this programme two objectives were set as prerequisites for the creation of the National Internship Programme: 1) formulation of national standards for quality internship programmes and 2) improvement of the regulatory framework for internship programmes.

It is therefore crucial at this moment to formulate the key dimensions of internships programmes which provide the basis for quality standards and to integrate them in a National Internship Programme as general recommendations for the organization of internships. Not only will the young people included in the National Internship Programme benefit from this, but also it will significantly improve the quality of internships organized by state and private institutions in Serbia.

The issue of the organisation of internships has been in the focus of the Belgrade Open School (hereinafter: BOS) for several years. Recognising the significance of equipping young people with much needed practical skills and knowledge, BOS has organized several internship programmes and created policy recommendations based on extensive experience (Pavlović Križanić, Velev & Đurović, 2015). Previous policy recommendations were associated with cooperative education and the regulatory framework of internships outside of education system. The aim of this policy brief is to draw attention on the pressing and ubiquitous issue of quality standards and to formulate viable policy recommendations how to meet this goal.

## **Do interns in Serbia have a right to decent work?**

The high rate of youth unemployment and the mismatch of skills that young people possess and the skills that are needed on the labour market are pressing and long-term problems in Serbia. Young people feel utterly unprepared for the world of work. According to a recent survey by Serbian Association of Employers (2014), 86% of the questioned young people believe that they have not acquired practical knowledge and skills during their formal education, while the employers report that the lack of practical experience presents a major obstacle to employment of young people.

The omnipresent problem of underskilled young people can be remedied by internship programmes. Research suggests that young people believe such short-term work experiences to be a successful instrument to increase their employability.

According to a survey which interviewed EU citizens aged 18-35 years, 81% of respondents believe that during the internship they had learnt things that were useful for them professionally. Similarly, the results of a recent research study on the status and needs of youth in Serbia (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2015) show that 70% of those surveyed report that they find internship programmes extremely important for improving the knowledge and skills necessary for work, while 74% of them agree that internship programmes should be mandatory during formal education. However, since at this moment there are no standards at all regarding internships, the quality of internships can vary significantly, which can seriously undermine their potential to provide useful early labour market experience to young people.

At this moment there is a large number of internship programmes within and outside of the education system. The recent reforms in the system of secondary vocational education and higher education have brought about changes regarding internships. Namely, there is a tendency to include mandatory internships during schooling and to increase the number of hours that students spend learning in a working environment. While it is evident that there are still schools and universities which do not organise mandatory internships for their students, it is true to say that it is less often the case that students do not have any kind of insight into the workplace experience during schooling. According to a recent survey (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2015) at this moment between 29% and 45% of young people aged 15 to 30 have participated in at least one internship. Taking into account the recent educational reforms, this number is likely to increase.

Moreover, there is a growing number of internship programmes organized outside of the system of formal education aimed at unemployed young people. For instance, the annual action plans for the Strategy of employment 2011-2020 regularly foresee projects organised by the National Employment Service and local self-governments aimed at creating more opportunities for traineeships, internships and apprenticeships for young people. Moreover, centres for career development within universities and faculties, as well as large companies regularly organize a great number of internships for students and graduates.

Taking into account how widespread internship programmes are at this moment and how many young people participate in these programmes, it is paramount to ensure their quality. The first step in this process could be the inclusion of quality standards in the National Internship Programme in Serbia, which is to be formulated in the year 2016.

## **Three vital dimensions of quality internship programmes**

The Council of the EU recommendation on a Quality Framework for Traineeships lays out the vital dimensions of quality internship programmes. The quality standards have been elaborated in the publications of the European Youth Forum, which strongly advocates for quality internships. The recommendations put forward can be grouped into three vital pillars:

- 1) establishing an effective mentorship system;
- 2) setting and evaluating learning goals;
- 3) regulating working conditions through a contract or written agreement.

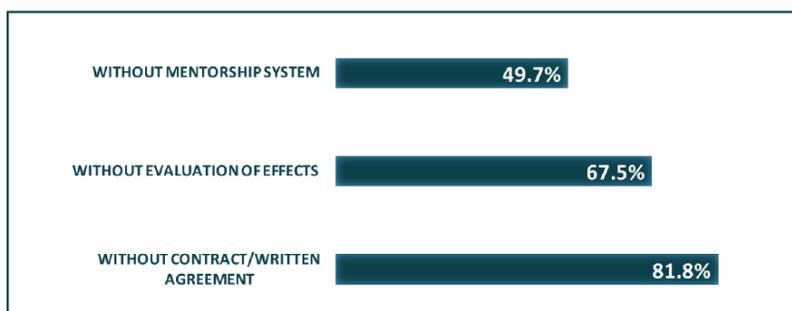
---

<sup>1</sup>Survey was conducted on a random sample of 1500 young people aged 15-30.

Precise learning goals and an evaluation system along with a mentor for every intern ensure that internships represent a helpful learning experience. Moreover, it is paramount to ensure adequate working conditions for interns, such as a reasonable duration of the internship, limits to maximum weekly working time, and the provision of necessary equipment and health and accident insurance.

In order to verify the assumption of what constitutes a quality internship programme, a BOS research team conducted a small-scale research study with forty young people who have participated in BOS internship programmes. The interns believe that it is crucial that 1) internships provide a valuable learning experience, 2) an experienced mentor gives guidance to interns and 3) there is a support for their further employment (such as a certificate at the end of the internship).

What is the current state of affairs regarding these dimensions? Some of the numerous internship programmes on the state level and in private sector are organized taking these dimensions into account, whereas for many it is not the case. On the one hand, according to recent research results, more than a half of young people surveyed who have participated in an internship programme undertook this experience without an established mentorship system, any evaluation of learning goals or a written contract or agreement (Diagram 1).



*Diagram 1 - Youth participation in internship programmes implemented without standards of quality according to the report *The status and needs of youth in Serbia* (2015)*

On the other hand, all employers who want to participate in the National Employment Service internship programmes are obliged to 1) set and evaluate learning goals, 2) establish a mentorship system, 3) sign a contract with interns, 4) provide financial compensation for interns and 5) provide certificates for interns. Similarly, the proposed elements of student internships (created as a product of the TEMPUS project) also refer to learning goals, a mentorship system, a certification and a contract or agreement. Evidently, there is a consensus on the importance of the dimensions we propose. Yet at the same time, there are numerous examples of a blatant abuse of internships.

The article 201 in the Labour Law which refers to the Contract of Vocational Training and Improvement was changed in 2014. Since then, this Contract can be used only if there is a special regulation which requires people from a certain profession to gain practical knowledge and skills. In this way the length of the process of gaining practical skills – the internship – is also determined by the special regulation and is therefore limited. Before this change came into effect, the Labour Inspection had regularly reported misuse of this contract form. For instance, it was not rarely the case that some people stayed in a company for ten years as interns. The change of the article 201 was a response to all of the previous misuses of this Contract.

However, this also brought about the current inability of employers to use this specific form of contract, since a large proportion of professions do not require obligatory trainings and are not recognized by these special regulations. Consequently, the vast majority of interns sign a contract not recognised by the Law or do not sign a contract at all which obviously puts them in an extremely vulnerable situation.

Moreover, there is a confusion between the terms "intern" and "volunteer". It is often the case that the term "volunteer" is used for unpaid interns and in this case the dimensions mentioned above are disregarded, as volunteering is less structured. Furthermore, trainees in health care and in the legal system are defined as volunteers by the law and this fact is even more worrying taking into account that the length of these traineeships can surpass a year. In addition, according to the research results of the graduate survey, graduates rate the quality of internships within higher education fairly low, at an average rate of 2.4 out of 5.

Above all, there are no recommendations at the national level regarding internships and no monitoring of their quality. This leads to an utterly unjust situation where some young people have access to quality internship programmes and others do not. Also, this worsens the already acute problem of underskilled young people, and consequently enhances youth inactivity and unemployment.

Further institutional and regulatory steps are necessary to ensure that internship schemes are not abused to replace quality employment and that interns receive appropriate training through a decent work environment. By establishing quality standards, a positive in-house/in-company status of interns will be encouraged and providers of internships will be motivated to apply a clear and coherent code of conduct.

As evident by the recent discussion with stakeholders, there is a consensus that the absence of standards is an issue that needs to be addressed. Namely, the representatives of employers, career development centres and youth organizations have reached the conclusion that the current regulatory framework creates obstacles for the organization of internship programmes. Moreover, based on the statements of government officials and on strategic documents, this issue is going to be high on the agenda in the following years.

## **Recommendations regarding the formulation of the National Internship Programme**

The creation and implementation of a quality National Internship Programme is a long-term and comprehensive process. Hence, the following recommendations are divided in two groups:

- 1) Recommendations concerning the creation of the National Internship Programme applicable in the short term, and**
- 2) Recommendations regarding the implementation of the Programme that concern the longer term.**

---

<sup>2</sup>Report on discussions from the round table held on 11th of December 2015. <http://www.bos.rs/cgcc-eng/news-archive/297/2015/12/13/round-table--challenges-and-perspectives-on-quality-internship-programmes-in-the-republic-of-serbia--the-analysis-of-regulatory-framework.html>

### For the creation of the National Internship Programme (2016)

- 1 Draft a National Internship Programme of Serbia. This was foreseen in the Action Plan on the implementation of the National Youth Strategy and the National Programme for Youth Employment 2020. Explicit internship quality standards need to be incorporated into the National Internship Programme of Serbia.
- 2 Create a General recommendations section as an Appendix to the National Internship Programme which elaborates the quality standards in detail. The Appendix is to be used also as a baseline for the further development of the internship system through a Special Regulation on Internship Organization which will oblige all internship providers, not just state and local institutions. In this way, decision makers will recognize the quality internship standards independently from the National Internship Programme of Serbia.

#### The key dimensions to be included in the National Internship Programme are:

Establishing an effective mentorship system. A mentor (an employee with experience) is needed in order to direct the intern throughout the programme and supervise his/her progress.

Setting and evaluating learning goals. The internship provider is obliged to set learning goals and tasks related to a specific internship programme and unambiguously outline them in a written form.

Regulating working conditions through contract or written agreement. The basis for a quality internship should be a written agreement or a contract which precisely presents the rights and duties of both parties.

### For the implementation of the National Internship Programme (2017-2020)

- 1 Article 201 of the Labour Law should be modified so it can be used for all types of internships and traineeships. The length of internship programmes for which this contract is signed should be regulated so these programmes cannot be longer than a year.
- 2 Create and adopt a Regulation on Internship Organization on the basis of standards elaborated in the National Internship Programme in a General recommendations section. This regulation would define the minimum quality standards that every internship provider needs to follow.
- 3 Establish a regulatory system for monitoring and evaluating all internship and traineeship programmes in Serbia, introducing a requirement for all internship providers to monitor and evaluate their programmes. Given the current structure of the educational and labour system in Serbia, monitoring and evaluation may be carried out by the Education Inspection within the education system and by the Labour Inspection for internships and traineeships outside of the education system.
- 4 Conduct regular research studies on the internship programmes in order to produce evidence-based policies. The Ministry of Youth and Sports yearly conduct research studies on status and needs of youth in Serbia. In order to monitor and evaluate policies regarding internships, it is necessary to regularly include questions about internship programmes in the questionnaire used in these surveys.
- 5 Establish a network of institutions and companies which provide quality internship programmes and promote their results publicly.

## NOTES

1. Pavlović Križanić, T, Velev, B. & Đurović, A. (2015), Internships and Traineeships in Serbia: Challenges and Perspectives, Belgrade Open School, Belgrade.
  2. European Commission, (2013), The Experience of traineeships in the EU, Flash Eurobarometer 378.
  3. Council of the European Union, (2014), Council recommendation on a quality framework for traineeships (Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council Meeting).
  4. Serbian Association of Employers, (2014), Better conditions for employment of youth – the role and significance of student and vocational internship, Serbian Association of Employers, Belgrade.
  5. Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Serbia, The status and needs of youth in Serbia (2015), Ministry of Youth and Sports, Belgrade.
  6. The new model for organization of students' internships, (2013), published at [http://projects.tempus.ac.rs/attachments/project\\_resource/1143/1885\\_SI\\_models.pdf](http://projects.tempus.ac.rs/attachments/project_resource/1143/1885_SI_models.pdf)
  7. CONGRAD Analytical unit, (2014). From student to (un)employed professional - Findings from the first graduate survey in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro within the Tempus project CONGRAD.
- 



### **With the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union.**

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.



**Supported by a grant from the Open Society Institute in cooperation with the Think Tank Fund of the Open Society Foundations.**