



# **REGIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP MOBILITY PROGRAMME**

**THE ROLE OF CAREER COUNSELLING AND  
INTERNSHIP PROGRAMMES IN FACILITATING  
STUDENTS' TRANSITION FROM UNIVERSITY  
TO WORKFORCE**

**OPEN SOCIETY  
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## **Disclaimer**

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# Executive Summary

The Western Balkans are experiencing a substantial challenge, in terms of youth unemployment, particularly among individuals aged 15-30. As of 2023, the rates of youth unemployment were notably high in the region, with figures standing at 22% in Albania (INSTAT, 2024), 28.57% in North Macedonia (O'Neill, 2024) and 28.4% in Serbia (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). This concerning trend underscores the difficulties encountered by young people during their transition from student to professional life. The educational systems in the region are grappling with outdated infrastructure, inadequate teaching materials, and deficiency of practical training opportunities. Collectively, these factors contribute to the mismatch of skills acquired by students and those demanded by the labour market.

In Albania, the government has mandated that university students' complete internships as part of their curriculum, a policy supported by the National Youth Strategy 2022-2029. This strategy aims to enhance career counselling, employment services, and to address educational and technological challenges. Nonetheless, the data available on the effectiveness of these internship programmes in facilitating employment for graduates is limited. North Macedonia has implemented a strategy that involves practical training and internships as part of the higher education curricula. However, many students have reported inadequate access to these opportunities and a general lack of awareness about available career counselling services. The abolition of mandatory internship programmes in 2019 further diminished practical training opportunities for students. In Serbia, internships and career counselling services are prioritized as part of the National Youth Strategy 2023-2030. Nevertheless, students often encounter challenges such as insufficient compensation, limited internship opportunities, and inconsistent quality of career counselling. These issues are compounded by a significant mismatch between the skills offered by educational institutions and those required by employers.

The results of the research conducted through focus groups and surveys across Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia demonstrate a consistent pattern. Participants expressed significant concerns about the efficacy of career counselling and internship programmes. The contrast between student experience in private vs. that in public universities is apparent, with the former, generally, reporting better access to career services and more effective internship placements, while the latter frequently encountering mandatory but ineffective internships that lack practical learning and meaningful engagement. The online survey, which targeted nearly graduating and recently graduated students aged 20-27, revealed varying levels of quality and satisfaction among respondents who had undergone internships. Many students relied on personal efforts and networks to secure internships, underscoring the necessity for stronger institutional support. In addition, a notable gap was observed in the awareness and utilization of career counselling services, with many students being unaware of these resources.

The findings highlight the importance of continuous dialogue among educational institutions, policymakers, and industry stakeholders to ensure that career preparation resources remain relevant and effective in meeting the needs of students and the labour market. Universities should collaborate with industry partners to enhance the quality and relevance of internship programmes. This collaboration can serve to ensure internships offer clear pathways for academic credit and professional development. Furthermore, universities should organize career fairs and networking events to enhance student exposure to potential employers and career pathways. Increasing awareness and institutional support for career services, particularly in public universities, is also crucial.

# 1. Introduction

School to work transition is the passage of a young person from end of schooling to the first stable or satisfactory employment (ILO, 2024). School to work transition and employability are linked concepts. Youth in the Western Balkans face formidable challenges in transitioning from student life to the professional world, as evidenced by high youth unemployment rates. The difficulties youth face in the labour market across the Western Balkans include lack of job opportunities and youth entrepreneurship, inadequate infrastructure and teaching materials in vocational education and training schools, and insufficient career counselling services and internship programmes, thus contributing to the mismatch between skills and labour market demands, and complicating the transition from university to employment for graduates (RCC, 2021).

Young individuals often encounter difficulties in finding opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge and acquire the practical skills required for success in the labour market, leading to inefficiencies and rejections due to skill gaps (Hashemiparast et al. 2019). This is primarily due to educational programmes frequently failing to provide direct practical experience opportunities contributing to degree completion. Moreover, as technology advances and competition intensifies, the challenges faced by young job seekers have only become more complex. In fact, while education is designed to equip individuals with the skills necessary for the workplace, the rapid pace of technological development and the increasing demand for innovative and professional roles have raised the bar for employment – paradoxically - making it both easier and more challenging to secure and retain jobs. Graduates often lack the requisite skills that employers highly value, such as personal attributes, interpersonal skills, time management, teamwork, and professionalism. Despite possessing technical knowledge, many new graduates find themselves inadequately prepared for the evolving demands of the job market. This discrepancy highlights a critical need for higher education systems to adapt their curricula and teaching methods to align with the rapidly changing business landscape and labour market requirements (Behluli et al. 2022).

In the Western Balkans, these challenges manifest in several distinct ways. Notably, the absence of practical training is a pressing concern for students in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. On the one hand, students in the three countries are not familiar with university-level career services, which are often limited in availability. In addition, even when available, students have low awareness about their importance or effectiveness (Shahu et al., 2021). On the other, they also have limited access to internship programmes, even when they are integrated into university programmes (as is the case in Albania). In North Macedonia, the situation is compounded by the 2019 abolition of mandatory internship programmes (Qoku, 2020). This decision has left a gap in practical training opportunities, reducing students' chances for gaining essential work experience before graduation. Meanwhile, in Serbia, where internship programmes are still non-mandatory, students often lack incentives to pursue these opportunities voluntarily (Kovačević, 2022). The absence of a formal requirement or structured support further limits the effectiveness and uptake of internships, leaving graduates with fewer practical skills and less prepared for the labour market.

To further exacerbate issues, university governing bodies and the responsible ministries provide inadequate guidance to facilitate smooth transition for students into the labour market. This includes the development of practical skills such as resume writing, interview preparation, and networking opportunities through career fairs. Comprehensive reforms

and targeted initiatives are crucial to addressing these challenges and enhancing the employability of youth in the Western Balkans (European Training Foundation, 2022).

## 1.1 Albania

Education and employability in Albania are governed by specialized strategies and legislative framework. Specifically, the key legislation regulating higher education is Law No. 80/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research in Institutions of Higher Education in the Republic of Albania." Adopted after a sectoral reform initiated in 2014, this law aims to provide a new dimension to the concept of academic and financial freedom, and to create more organic connections between studies and the labour market needs. The strategic vision of the government for the education sector is laid out in the National Education Strategy 2021 – 2026, which is based on the paradigm of **Lifelong Learning**, and covers both formal and informal learning. The responsible line ministry for the successful implementation of the strategy is the Ministry of Education and Sports.

Employability, on the other hand, is regulated by Law No. 15/2019 "On Employment Promotion", which aims to increase the employability of the workforce, through the provision of public employment, self-employment and professional qualification services and programmes. Strategically, the main policy document that guides the implementation of employment and skills development actions in the country is the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030. In addition to other objectives, the strategy foresees setting up an information system for career guidance and the implementation of functions thereby raising the capacities of development units for counselling. The responsible line ministry for the successful implementation of the actions noted above is the Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation.

Finally, in line with the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027, the Minister of State for Youth and Children in Albania is implementing the National Youth Strategy 2022–2029 with the aim on designing national youth policies to address challenges, including those related to the involvement of young people in decision-making processes, employment, education, technology and innovation, etc. In addition, this line ministry is also leading the flagship initiative called the National Work Practice Programme. Launched in 2015, this programme aims to enable young people aged 21 to 26, who have completed at least the first cycle of Bachelor studies, to gain practical experience thereby contributing to the development of their professional, academic and personal competencies.

This complex institutional and legal framework requires extensive coordination between the different actors to ensure that the objectives laid out in the strategies are duly accomplished. At the same time, they also make it challenging for youth to understand the full extent of the programmes and opportunities available to them without guidance, either directly from these policymaking institutions, or from the academic institutions in which they are enrolled in.

INSTAT data (2024) confirms that young people (aged 15-29) make about 17.91% of the population of Albania (587,888 out of a population of 2,402,113 inhabitants, as per the Census 2023 data). Only 20% of them (116,489) were enrolled in tertiary programmes (short cycle tertiary, bachelor and master degrees) in the academic year 2023-24, marking a decrease of 3.8% compared to 2022-23. In the 2022-23 academic year, 27,991 students graduated from tertiary education (INSTAT, 2024). Fields of study such as Business, Administration, and Law remain popular (selected by one fourth of the overall number of students).



While the number of study programmes in Albania is over 1,300, no specific criteria and strategic planning policies in the development of study programmes exist (Gjonca, 2014). The level and quality of education, which is considered to be closely related to employment, remains an issue of constant concern for young Albanians (Kamberi & Cela, 2020). In a positive development, since 2021, the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Ministry of State for Youth and Children have introduced mandatory internships for university students as part of their academic curricula and as a requirement for graduation (at both bachelor and master levels). Internships may last from three to twelve months and be carried out in different sectors. However, despite internships being mandatory for at least two full academic years, official statistics on the number of students participating in internships, sectors, effectiveness and job placement after graduation are still not publicly available.

Recent data (INSTAT, 2024) shows that **employment** rate of youth aged 15-29 was 43.1% at the end of the fourth quarter of 2023. Youth employment rate decreased by 1.5% compared to the previous year in the same quarter. On the other hand, youth **unemployment** over the same period was at 22% with a decrease of 0.5% compared to the previous year.

## 1.2 North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, curricula development in higher education is primarily overseen by the Ministry of Education and Science, which is responsible for formulating policies, strategies, and guidelines. The ministry ensures that educational institutions adhere to national standards and meet the evolving needs of the labour market. The Board for Accreditation and Evaluation of Higher Education plays a critical role in this process by approving new curricula and evaluating existing programmes to ensure they maintain high quality standards.

Higher education institutions, including universities and colleges, have the autonomy to design and deliver their curricula, provided they comply with the established national standards (Ministry of Education and Science of North Macedonia, 2018). Individual faculties or departments within these institutions often tailor their specific courses to meet both educational objectives and industry demands.

The primary legislative framework guiding this process is the Law on Higher Education, which sets out the organization, operation and governance of higher education institutions (Ministry of Education and Science of North Macedonia, 2018). This law emphasizes academic freedom and institutional autonomy while detailing the structure of study programmes. It also mandates that practical training and internships be incorporated into academic programmes, ensuring that students gain hands-on experience in their respective fields of study.

The law is complemented by the National Strategy for the Development of Education 2018-2025, which outlines the strategic goals for enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education. This strategy stresses the importance of aligning curricula with labour market needs and fostering innovation and research.

Career counselling services are also regulated by the Law on Higher Education, which requires universities to offer career support to students, assisting them with career planning, job search strategies, and professional development. The National Strategy for Employment supports this by including provisions for enhancing career counselling services within educational institutions, promoting the integration of career guidance into the overall educational experience (National Strategy for Employment, 2021).

University attendance rates in North Macedonia have remained relatively stable, with slight fluctuations over recent years. According to the State Statistical Office, approximately 57,000 students were enrolled in higher education institutions in the academic year 2022/2023 (State Statistical Office, 2023).

Despite the legal responsibility of universities to provide students with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills essential for their future careers, a significant gap and lack of practical skills and internship opportunities still prevail in university environments (Ismaili et al., 2023). One of the studies on the challenges of higher education in North Macedonia, conducted by Petrovska and Nikolovska (2018), pointed out that the academic programmes offered by universities in the country tend to prioritize theoretical understanding over practical implementation. This may result in graduates lacking the necessary preparation to fulfil the requirements of the labour market, which is progressively leaning towards individuals with practical experience (Petrovska & Nikolovska, 2018).

Similarly, while the Law on Higher Education from 2018 mandates the establishment of at least one career centre to oversee practical training, the current situation on the ground does not comply with these requirements. These services are often underdeveloped, with limited resources and support, leading to challenges for graduates in navigating the job search process and accessing career opportunities (Stojanoska et al., 2019).

In fact, the lack of hands-on training continues to be a significant issue for students, as evidenced in a 2021 survey carried out by Meta journalist (Nikolov, 2021). Numerous students expressed concern about the absence of practical experience in their academic programmes, fearing that they will be uninformed and unprepared for the labour market, particularly exacerbated by the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Nikolov, 2021). A study of the European Training Foundation (2020) highlighted a notable skills gap in North Macedonia, where employers frequently voiced concerns about the insufficient practical skills of graduates, thereby confirming in a way the fears of the students.

Yet, there is an increasing consensus among students, educators, and specialists about the importance and necessity of integrating internship programmes into university curricula (World Bank, 2021). These programmes should not only be incorporated into the academic curriculum but also appropriately recognized through credit allocation, thereby affording students crucial practical experience essential for their professional growth (Paskoska, 2022).

## 1.3 Serbia

Curriculum development, including internship requirements and guidelines for offering career counselling services in Serbian universities is regulated by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and the National Youth Strategy 2023-2030. The Ministry sets the framework for educational programmes, ensuring that practical training components are included, while the National Youth Strategy 2023-2030 emphasizes the importance of internships and career counselling as part of its broader goals to improve youth employability and address educational, employment and technological challenges faced by Serbian youth. These official documents highlight the need for comprehensive employment services and practical skill development to support the transition from education to the job market.

The primary institutions responsible for the design and monitoring of the education-

to-employment relationship are the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and the National Employment Service. These bodies collaborate with various educational institutions and employers to align educational outcomes with labour market needs, ensuring that the transition from education to employment is as seamless as possible.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a significant role in offering career counselling and internship opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged or marginalized groups. These organizations often collaborate with businesses and educational institutions to create inclusive internship programmes that promote diversity and social equality. They provide resources, mentorship, and support to help interns navigate their career paths and achieve their professional goals.

At the time of writing this policy paper, no mandatory internship requirement for graduating from an academic degree from an accredited programme in the Republic of Serbia existed. However, for those who chose to pursue such practical experience, they will be responsible for finding an internship opportunity through their own means. Once secured, their internship will be regulated by the Labour Law, which outlines the rights and responsibilities of both interns and employers. This legal framework ensures that the interests of both parties are protected, specifying working hours, compensation, and the nature of tasks that can be assigned to interns, thereby providing a structured environment for professional development.

Despite the Bologna Process efforts to enhance employability through practical training, studies on internship policies in Serbia remain scarce. While the authors were unable to find official data or reports on internship effectiveness from Serbian institutions, anecdotal evidence suggests that internships play a crucial role in shaping students' professional skills and career trajectories. According to Vukić et al. (2022), many students find internships valuable for gaining practical experience, although they often face challenges such as limited availability and lack of adequate compensation. Addressing the low internship participation rates requires thorough evaluation and regulatory enhancements to optimize their role in shaping sustainable professional careers.

According to recent statistics, youth unemployment in Serbia remains a significant challenge. Latest data shows that the youth unemployment rate in Serbia stands at approximately 28.4%, i.e., notably higher than the national average unemployment rate of around 13.5% (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). Efforts are undertaken to improve the situation through various programmes targeting youth employment.

In contrast, the participation rate of youth in higher education is on the rise. In the 2022/2023 academic year, approximately 50% of Serbian students aged 18-24 enrolled in higher education institutions (Ministry of Education, Republic of Serbia, 2023). This gradual increase in enrolment rates is a positive indicator of future improvements in the labour offer. However, despite rising enrolment rates, a substantial gap persists between the costs of education and expected graduate incomes, complicating the transition from academia to the job market. Addressing the disparity between education costs and graduate incomes, enhancing the quality and availability of internships, and strengthening career counselling services are crucial steps towards improving youth employment prospects and fostering overall economic growth in Serbia.



## 2. An Overview of Internships and Career Counselling

This policy paper seeks to examine how the current utilization of career counselling and internships in the Western Balkans is affecting labour market transition of recent university graduates. Specifically, it aims at addressing the following research questions:

How do youth in the Western Balkans perceive the effectiveness of internships and (university) career counselling services in preparing them for the job market?

What barriers prevent students from accessing internships that count towards their academic requirements in the Western Balkans?

How can (university) career counselling services be better promoted and utilized among students in the Western Balkans?

To comprehensively address these questions, this study integrated qualitative and quantitative approaches. First, a focus group was conducted in each country to gather qualitative insights and facilitate in-depth discussions among participants. This was followed by distributing an online survey targeting near-graduates and recently graduated students, aged 20-27. This approach aimed to provide a detailed understanding of the current landscape and to identify actionable insights for improving educational and employment outcomes for youth in the region.

### 2.1 Approach and Methods

The study employed a consistent approach across three countries, conducting focus groups targeting recent graduates who had received career counselling and/or participated in internships and those who had not. These focus groups, held in person from May to June 2024, aimed to explore the nuances of internship and career counselling effectiveness. Each focus group included at least five participants and covered three main topics: i) initial job market-related concerns, ii) assessment of university programme preparedness for job transitions, and iii) evaluation of career counselling or internship experience (or reasons for lack thereof). Questions were structured and translated into local languages, with the focus group guide detailed in the Annexes.

An online survey was conducted to gather a broader dataset for statistical analysis and trend identification of youth perceptions to complement the focus group insights. Respondent recruitment utilized convenience and snowball sampling methods, leveraging networks such as educational institutions, student organizations, and partner organizations like the Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme – YEF, YIHR, and SCiDEV. The survey ran for 7 weeks - from May to June 2024. Demographic details of the 140 survey participants who fully completed the questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic features of survey respondents

Demographic feature	Name	N
Nationality	Albanian	116
	Macedonian	17
	Serbian	7
Age	18-19	18
	20-27	115
	28+	7
Gender	Female	96
	Male	44
Highest Education	Bachelor	128
	Masters	12
Internship Status	Internship	76
	Not Done	64
Employment Status	Full Time employed	22
	Part-Time employed	20
	Not employed, but not searching	45
	Not employed, but searching	53

Additional demographic data tracks the type of university attended (private or public) and fields of study. Approximately 82% of participants studied Social Sciences, with the remainder split between Humanities and Health Sciences. Moreover, approximately 84% attended private universities.

## 2.2 Merits and Limits

The research methodology employed in this study offers valuable insights into the topic through the integration of focus groups and surveys. These methods enabled the collection of various viewpoints, encompassing qualitative (descriptive) and quantitative (numerical) data. However, it is crucial to acknowledge certain limitations. The survey results were significantly skewed towards responses from Albania, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings across all three countries. This imbalance in participation, coupled with the relatively small sample size, restricts the extent to which these findings can accurately represent the sentiments of young people in all target countries. Nevertheless, when interpreted alongside the findings from the literature review and those from focus groups, the responses provide valuable insights into students' perceptions regarding the role and effectiveness of career counselling support and internships. These insights contribute to understanding how these programmes can be enhanced to better prepare students for the labour market challenges.

## 3. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the results and findings from the field research, analysing how youth perceive that participation in internships and how the use of university career services can affect their preparation for the job market and reflect on how to better promote them in the three countries. By examining these aspects within the institutional frameworks of the three countries, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that shape students' experiences with internships and career counselling.

### 3.1 Focus Group Findings

#### Albania

One focus group discussion was held in Albania, with a total of 8 participants – 4 of them had benefitted from internship experience and/or career counselling services, and 4 had not. They provided nuanced perspectives on their academic choices and interactions with university support systems. Participants from non-public universities reported more proactive engagement with career counselling offices, noting regular communication about internship opportunities from early in their academic careers. In contrast, those from public universities, particularly those who attended five years ago, described limited awareness and use of career counselling services. Internship experience revealed stark disparities between private and public university students. Participants from private institutions generally expressed satisfaction with the support and opportunities provided by career counsellors, including effective internship placements. In contrast, graduates from public universities highlighted mandatory yet ineffectual internships, often lacking practical learning and meaningful engagement.

Motivations for selecting their fields of study varied widely, ranging from career aspirations to familial influences or perceived financial prospects. When considered in relation to job market preparedness, participants from business management programmes generally felt adequately equipped, whereas engineering graduates from public universities expressed frustration over insufficient practical skills development. Those who engaged with career services in private universities reported feeling more prepared for job searches and interviews than their public institution peers. Throughout the discussions, participants identified several challenges in navigating the labour market, including unrealistic experience expectations and limited practical learning opportunities during their studies. They emphasized the need for greater trust from internship providers and stronger university-industry partnerships to enhance practical skills development and job readiness. Reflecting on their experience, participants would have advised their younger selves to prioritize networking, attend workshops, and focus on practical skills development rather than solely academic achievements.

#### North Macedonia

One focus group discussion was held in North Macedonia, with a total of 11 participants – 3 of them had benefitted from internship experience and/or career counselling services, and 8 had not. Overall, participants expressed significant fears about entering the labour market. They felt unprepared, worried about the lack of job opportunities in their field and believed that securing a job would be difficult without political connections or advanced degrees. They also noted that employers rarely invested in developing practical skills. Regarding university study programmes, the consensus was clear: the education system did not

prepare them for the transition to the workforce adequately. They criticized universities for failing to connect students with potential employers or provide necessary practical skills. Mandatory internships and early engagement in labour market realities were identified as crucial needs. The assessment of their practical skills revealed that most practical knowledge was self-acquired through personal initiative and non-governmental sector activities. Institutional support was minimal, and information about job opportunities was sparse and reliant on professor discretion. For those who had participated in internships or received career counselling, the experience were disappointing. Many felt abandoned, with no real practical skill development. Participants called for substantial reforms, stressing the need to address current deficiencies and better align services with student needs. Students who did not engage with career counselling services cited lack of awareness and accessibility. Many were unaware of such offices at their universities, and those that did exist were often closed. This was seen as a reflection of the universities' broader disinterest in student welfare. Despite this criticism, the importance of career counselling was recognized. Participants believed these services should go beyond job placement, including soft skills development and diverse opportunities. Participants recommended addressing these issues from high school onwards to support students, involving universities, career centres, professors, and other stakeholders. They noted the rise of private academies offering practical skills training due to the inadequacies of traditional institutions. Advice to their younger selves included being patient, investing in self-development, and actively engaging in their studies. They emphasized the importance of resilience, not relying on political connections, and striving for meaningful opportunities.

### **Serbia**

Two focus group discussions were held in Serbia, with a total of 10 participants – 8 of them had benefited from internship experience and/or career counselling services, and 2 had not. Perspectives on the effectiveness of career counselling offices and internship experience within their university education varied across participants. Those with internship experience expressed dissatisfaction with career counselling services, finding them less impactful than guidance from professors and personal research efforts. Conversely, participants without internship experience criticized career counselling offices for inconsistent availability and perceived rude attitude, particularly in public universities. Both groups agreed that they felt ill-prepared by their university study programmes for the job market transition. They noted lack of guidance on post-graduation expectations, such as job search challenges, the need for volunteering, or potential unpaid work. Regarding mentorship during internships, participants highlighted discrepancy between formal arrangements and practical support. Many felt they had to navigate their internships independently, relying on self-directed learning or assistance from peers and online resources. When discussing the biggest challenges in navigating today's labour market, participants identified insufficient practical skills and readiness as significant hurdles. They anticipated a steep learning curve upon entering their first job, stressing the importance of practical experience during university education. Respondents had differing satisfaction with the practical skills gained through career counselling and internships. Some students were moderately satisfied with their internships, appreciating the skills and task familiarity they developed. They also found that the basic preparation provided by their universities beforehand enhanced their internship experience. Reflecting on their experience, participants offered advice to their younger selves regarding the job search process. Advice included managing expectations of low initial pay, persistence in job hunting, and maintaining a balanced approach to work and personal development.

The focus group discussions across Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia reveal common challenges and disparities in youth education and employment. In Albania, there is a clear divide between private and public university students regarding access to career counselling and effective internships. North Macedonia's participants expressed fears about job market readiness and highlighted the necessity for practical skills and employer connections. Serbian participants underscored lack of guidance and preparation from universities, with a significant gap in practical skills development. These findings indicate a consistent need for stronger university-industry partnerships, enhanced career counselling services, and practical training across the region. The following section will delve deeper into these issues, providing quantitative backing to these qualitative insights and exploring the broader implications for youth employment and education policies.

## 3.2 Survey Analysis

The online survey gathered responses from 140 young individuals, with their demographic features highlighted in Table 1. While youth is generally considered to be from ages 15-29 years in these three countries, our analysis will focus specifically on a subset of this population, those aged 20-27. Out of the 140 responses, 115 fell into this specified youth category.

The survey was structured into four main sections:

Experience with internships (or reasons for lack thereof)

Experience with career counselling (or reasons for lack thereof)

Suggestions for improving career counselling services

Navigation of the labour market

The survey analysis thoroughly examines the experience and perceptions of nearly graduates and recent graduates aged 20-27 regarding internships and career counselling services. Recognizing the pivotal role internships play in bridging the gap between academic learning and professional skills, the data reveals that a significant proportion of respondents (54.29% or 62 respondents) undertook internships during their studies. This finding underscores the importance of integrating practical experience within the academic curriculum. However, an equally notable 40.71% (or 47 respondents) completed their internships post-graduation, indicating that the need for practical experience persists even after obtaining a degree. Interestingly, only a small minority (5%) reported lack of internship opportunities during their academic tenure, highlighting potential gaps in the provision of practical training. This might be related to the fact that 83% of respondents had studied in private universities, which focus group findings indicated as being better connected to industry. On the other hand, it might also be linked with the methods through which respondents secured internships. While these varied widely, reflecting diverse approaches and resources, substantial 42.86% (or 49 respondents) found their internships through personal efforts, demonstrating a proactive attitude among students towards securing practical experience. The role of personal networks was also significant, with 28.57% (or 33 respondents) obtaining internships through referrals by family and friends. Career services facilitated internships for 22.14% (or 25 respondents) of respondents, indicating the vital role of institutional support in career development. In addition, academic mentors contributed by referring 7.14% (or 8 respondents), albeit their influence was comparatively smaller.



Motivations for pursuing internships were equally diverse, reflecting both academic requirements and personal initiative. Curriculum requirements drove 40.71% of respondents to undertake internships, emphasizing the integration of practical training within academic programmes. Meanwhile, 30.71% were motivated by personal desire to gain practical experience, highlighting a strong individual drive to enhance employability. Another 28.57% reported that internships were not applied, suggesting that some students perceive lack of practical components in their academic courses or face barriers to accessing internship opportunities.

Among those who had had internship experience (76 respondents), responses on satisfaction painted a relatively optimistic picture. A significant portion were satisfied (40.71%) or very satisfied (33.57%) with their internships, indicating a generally positive reception. Conversely, 10.71% reported dissatisfaction, and 7.14% were very much unsatisfied, highlighting a notable minority who had less favourable experience. Despite the somewhat positive responses, this feedback underscores the variability in internship quality and points to the need for improvements to ensure consistent, valuable student experience.

Awareness and use of career advice services were also explored, revealing gaps in both awareness and utilisation. While 54.28% of respondents knew that their university provided career advice services, 38.57% were unaware, indicating a concerning awareness gap. Only 7.14% reported that their university did not offer career advice services. Moreover, 58.57% had never used these services, while 24.29% had, suggesting underutilisation despite availability. This is a clear indication of the urgent need to improve both visibility and accessibility of career counselling services in universities.

The analysis of job search duration provided further insights into graduates' challenges when entering the job market. A substantial majority (69.29% or 80 respondents) found jobs within a year of graduation, reflecting a bleak reality for young graduates in the region. However, the longer job search durations for 28.57% (or 33 of respondents) indicate that a significant minority face ongoing challenges. Exploring the role of internships in this context, our findings revealed that there was no significant difference in job search duration between those who had completed internships and those who had not. This suggests that, despite the common belief that internships help expedite the job search process, their impact may not be as straightforward as anticipated.

These insights highlight the complexity of the job market for young graduates and underscore the need for comprehensive career support services. Effective career counselling, enhanced networking opportunities, and practical experience through internships remain critical components in addressing the multifaceted challenges graduates face. However, the lack of significant differences in job search outcomes between those with and without internships points to potential shortcomings in the current internship programmes.

Factor analysis further explored the relationships between various components of the internship experience and the effectiveness of career counselling. All components related to the effectiveness of internships (mandatory internships, career-related internships, high-quality internships, growth opportunities during internships, and internship satisfaction) showed significant positive relationships. This underscores that these factors substantially contribute to the perceived effectiveness of internships. The quality of career counselling services significantly influenced the perception of career counselling effectiveness, highlighting the critical role of effective career counselling in shaping positive student perceptions. Job market perceptions and support networks suggestively impacted the perception of the job market, while the pressure to find a job quickly did not

affect this perception much. This suggests that while job availability and support networks are crucial, urgency in the job search does not play a major role.

In summary, the findings from both focus groups and survey analysis reveal the need for more comprehensive career guidance, practical experience opportunities, and stronger university support for students in these countries. The survey findings align with the focus group results, both highlighting the importance of internships and career counselling services in preparing students for the job market. Focus groups revealed a significant disparity between private and public university students in terms of access and satisfaction with these services. The survey data corroborated these insights, showing varied satisfaction levels with internships and a gap in awareness and use of career advice services. While students often rely on personal efforts and networks to secure internships, institutional support is crucial. Significant gaps in awareness and utilization of career counselling services indicate the need for better communication. Although some students have positive internship experience, variability in quality suggests room for improvement. Addressing these issues through targeted policies and enhanced support will better prepare students for the job market. Future research should explore strategies to promote career counselling and examine the long-term impact of internships on employability.

## 4. Policy Recommendations and Actions

In addressing the multifaceted challenges identified through comprehensive research on career counselling, internship experience, and student preparedness for transition into the labour market in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, translating the findings into actionable policy recommendations is critical. This section delineates both short-term interventions and long-term strategies aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of university career services, optimising internship opportunities, and fostering an enabling environment conducive to student success in the evolving job market landscape. These recommendations aim to bridge gaps in practical skills development, improve institutional support structures, and foster robust public-private collaborations, thereby equipping students with the necessary tools to navigate and thrive in their professional journeys.

### **Short-Term Policy Recommendations:**

The survey revealed that 54.29% of respondents completed internships during their studies, while 40.71% did so post-graduation. Moreover, the data indicated no significant difference in job search duration between those who had completed internships and those who had not, suggesting that internship quality needs improvements. To address this, universities should collaborate closely with industry partners to enhance the quality and relevance of internship programmes. Short-term actions should involve reviewing internship guidelines and providing clearer pathways for academic credit and professional development during internships. University career services should initiate regular meetings with industry partners to discuss and update internship guidelines. They should work together to integrate practical industry requirements into internship programmes. Academic departments can contribute by aligning coursework with internship goals, ensuring students gain relevant skills. Industry partners should provide input on industry trends and expectations, ensuring internships meet current market needs.

Implementing short-term measures to facilitate networking opportunities between students and industry professionals is crucial. This can be achieved by organising career fairs, industry panels, and on-campus and virtual networking events, which enhance

student exposure to potential employers and career pathways. University career services should lead the planning and coordination of career fairs and networking events. They should collaborate closely with student associations to ensure that events meet student needs and interests. Industry associations can support this by providing speakers and industry representatives for panels and networking sessions. These events should be promoted widely across campus and through digital platforms to maximize student participation and industry engagement.

A concerning 58.57% of respondents reported never having used career counselling services, despite 54.28% being aware of their availability. Immediate actions should focus on raising awareness and institutional support for career services, particularly in public universities with lower awareness and utilization. This includes allocating sufficient resources, updating infrastructure, and fostering a supportive environment that encourages active participation in career development activities. University administrations should allocate resources for comprehensive awareness campaigns. Career services can utilize multiple communication channels, including social media, newsletters, and campus events to reach students. Student affairs departments should collaborate to ensure that career services are integrated into student orientations and academic advice sessions.

### **Long-Term Policy Recommendations:**

Long-term strategies should aim to integrate career development modules into the academic curriculum from an early stage. This involves collaborating with academic departments to embed career readiness skills, such as job search strategies and professional communication, into course content across disciplines.

Establishing long-term partnerships between universities, government entities, and private sectors can enhance internship opportunities and career guidance initiatives. This involves developing sustainable frameworks for collaboration, incentivizing industry participation in student mentorship programmes, and promoting joint research and innovation projects that align with industry needs.

The survey findings suggest that current internship programmes may not be sufficiently impactful in reducing job search duration, indicating a need for ongoing assessment and improvement. Implementing long-term evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of career counselling and internship programmes is essential. This includes conducting regular surveys, focus groups, and alumni feedback sessions to gather insights into programme efficacy, identify areas for improvement, and adapt strategies to evolving labour market demands.

Long-term advocacy efforts should focus on influencing policy reform at national and regional level to prioritize career development and internship initiatives. This includes advocating supportive policies that incentivize businesses to offer internships, funding mechanisms to support career services, and regulatory frameworks that promote equitable access to career opportunities for all students.

These short-term and long-term policy recommendations and actions are designed to address the challenges identified in career counselling, internship programmes, and student preparedness in navigating the job market in the Western Balkans. By implementing these strategies, universities can better equip students with the necessary skills and support systems to succeed professionally, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and competitive workforce regionally.

## 5. Conclusion

This policy study delved into the pressing issues of youth education and employment in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, particularly focusing on the role of internships and career counselling services. The findings from the focus groups and surveys reveal a shared concern among students about their preparedness for the labour market. Students highlighted the need for better career preparation resources, with many citing insufficient practical skills development and ineffective career counselling services.

Focus group discussions showed notable differences between private and public university students. Those from private universities generally experienced more proactive career counselling and better internship opportunities, while public university students often struggled with mandatory internships that lacked practical engagement. These qualitative insights were echoed in the survey results, where many students reported undertaking internships during their studies, primarily through personal efforts or networks rather than institutional support. Although internships were generally well-received, a significant minority expressed dissatisfaction, pointing to inconsistent quality. Moreover, awareness and use of career advice services were alarmingly low, with many students unaware of these resources.

To address these issues, several policy recommendations have been put forth. Firstly, universities need to better integrate internships into academic programmes, ensuring all students have access to high-quality, practical training. This can be achieved by fostering stronger university-industry partnerships and creating structured and meaningful internship programmes. Secondly, career counselling services should be made more accessible and visible. This includes providing comprehensive career guidance, soft skills development, and opportunities for networking and industry exposure. Effective communication on the availability and benefits of these services is crucial to increase student engagement. Lastly, there should be continuous assessment and alignment of academic programmes with industry needs, regularly updating curricula to reflect current labour market trends and incorporating practical skills development as a core component of university education.

In conclusion, the combined insights from the focus groups and surveys highlight the urgent need for improved institutional support in career counselling and internships to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional skills. Implementing these policy recommendations can better equip students for successful transitions into the workforce, enhancing their employability and contributing to the region's economic growth. The findings also emphasize the importance of continuous dialogue between educational institutions, policymakers, and industry stakeholders to ensure career preparation resources remain relevant and effective in meeting the evolving needs of students and the labour market.

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