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ЗАЈАКНУВАЊЕ НА МЛАДИТЕ ГРАДЕЊЕ ВЕШТИНИ, КРЕИРАЊЕ ИДНИНА

Identifying gaps in youth employment policies and the vocational education and training/craft sector in North Macedonia

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Introduction

Youth employability in North Macedonia is influenced by a complex structure of policies and institutions spanning education, labor, the economy, and youth issues. In recent years (approximately 2018–2024), the country has launched strategies and legal reforms to improve vocational education and training (VET), foster work-based learning, and support youth employment (e.g., the National Employment Strategy 2021–2027 and the new National Youth Strategy 2023–2027). Key laws—such as **the Law on Vocational Education and Training**, **the Law on Crafts**, **the Law on Labor Relations** (Labor Relations Law), and **the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies** (2020)—shape the legal environment for skills training and youth inclusion. Despite these efforts, several **policy gaps** hinder effective youth engagement, smooth school-to-work transitions, and sustainable employment in craft occupations. This brief overview maps the institutional set-up and highlights **at least four major policy gaps**, providing evidence and justification for each, along with recommendations for addressing them.

1. Governance and institutional coordination

Several public bodies share responsibility for youth employment and vocational education and training, which requires strong coordination. At the national level, the recently restructured **Ministry of Economy and Labour** (formerly the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy) is the lead authority for employment policy (including youth employment initiatives)¹. It develops the National Employment Strategy and annual operational plans for active labour market measures with a focus on vulnerable groups, including young people. The **Ministry of Education and Science (MES)** oversees formal education and vocational education and training schools, and has introduced elements of dual education within the curricula for secondary vocational education and training. The **Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth** (newly established in 2024) now leads youth policy and was created by upgrading the former Agency for Youth and Sports – a move welcomed by youth organisations hoping for more resources and a focus on youth issues. Other key actors are **the Employment Agency**, which implements employment programmes (job matching, internships, Youth Guarantee, etc.); **the Vocational Education and Training Centre** within the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, responsible for vocational education and training curricula, occupational standards and coordinating practical training requirements²; and sectoral bodies such as

¹ <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/32-administration-and-governance#:~:text=In%20North%20Macedonia%2C%20the%20governance,framework%20for%20youth%20employment%20initiatives>

² https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl_factsheet_north_macedonia_2020.pdf#:~:text=The%20Law%20on%20Vocational%20Education,in%20place%20in%20North%20Macedonia



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the **Chamber of Crafts** and the **Chambers of Commerce** , which maintain registers of companies licensed to provide practical training to secondary vocational students and to conduct master exam training and mentor training in companies (as is done by the Chamber of Crafts Skopje). International partners (UNDP, ILO, World Bank, EU, etc.) also support reforms and financing.³

Gap 1 – Fragmented coordination and overlapping responsibilities: *There is a lack of effective inter-institutional coordination and oversight in the implementation of youth employment and dual vocational education and training initiatives.* While frameworks exist (e.g. a **National Board for NQF** with ministries, employers and trade unions to link education with labour market needs ⁴and a working group to monitor the Employment Strategy led by the Ministry of Economy and Labour ⁵), gaps remain in practice. Overlaps and weak coordination occur, particularly between the education and work systems. For example, the Employment Agency’s youth programmes and the MES’ efforts on vocational education and training in schools often operate in parallel rather than in concert. The ILO’s assessment of the Youth Guarantee pilot project noted the need for **better coordination between the Ministry of Labour (which coordinates the Youth Guarantee) and the Youth Agency** , as well as a stronger partnership between the **MLSP and MES** to align education reforms with employment objectives. ⁶Currently, too many young people are leaving the education system without market-relevant skills, indicating gaps between educational outcomes and labour market needs. Coordination mechanisms for dual education are in their infancy – a broad working group developed a concept for work-based learning in 2019, adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2020, but this needs to be translated into continuous joint action by schools, the Centre for Vocational Education and Training, employers and the Employment Agency. In addition, although the **National Youth Advisory Body** was mandated by the 2020 Youth Law to bring together representatives of youth and ministries, it “*has not yet been formally established*” by the end of 2024 ⁷– leaving a gap in cross-sectoral

³ <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/32-administration-and-governance#:~:text=North%20Macedonia%27s%20Governmental%20institutions%20also,of%20North%20Macedonia%20and%20others>

⁴ https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl_factsheet_north_macedonia_2020.pdf#:~:text=Representatives%20of%20the%20chambers%20and,system%20with%20labour%20market%20needs

⁵ <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/32-administration-and-governance#:~:text=The%20Employment%20Service%20Agency%20and,progress%20of%20the%20Strategy%27s%20implementation>

⁶ https://northmacedonia.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/MKD_NEET%20Mapping%20and%20Policy%20Proposals_EN.pdf#:~:text=in%20dealing%20with%20detached%20young,the%20number%20of%20young%20people

⁷ <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/14-youth-policy-decision-making#:~:text=In%20July%202021%2C%20the%20Government,still%20not%20been%20formally%20established>



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governance of youth issues. **In short, policy implementation suffers from fragmentation** - education, labor, and youth authorities do not always act together, and governing bodies to ensure unity (such as the Youth Advisory Council or a separate interdepartmental commission on youth employment) either do not exist or are not yet functional.

Recommendation: Establish a high-level inter-institutional council on youth employment (or activate the National Youth Advisory Body) that will convene all relevant ministries (education, labor, economy, youth), the Center for Vocational Education and Training, the Employment Agency and representatives from the private sector. This body should regularly monitor initiatives on youth employment and dual vocational education, clarify roles and prevent overlaps. A joint strategy/action plan for the introduction of dual education should be developed, with common objectives and data exchange between the MES and the ESA (e.g. monitoring the employment outcomes of VET graduates). Strengthening the partnership between the MES and the Ministry of Labor (as recommended by the ILO) will help “*accelerate reforms in education and training, improve quality and reduce the number of young people leaving the system without employable skills*”. Clear **coordination protocols** need to be established (e.g. MES to consult labour market data and feedback from ESA when updating vocational education curricula). Finally, full implementation of the Law on Youth Participation – through the operationalization of the National Youth Advisory Body – would institutionalize youth input across sectors and improve policy coherence.

2. Legal treatment of work-based learning

North Macedonia's legislation has evolved to support work-based learning and youth employment, but gaps in incentives and burdens on businesses still exist:

- The Law on Vocational Education and Training (the new Law on Vocational Education and Training adopted on 03.01.2025 Official Gazette No. 3/2025, and the Amendments to this Law No. 74/2025 of 8 April 2025) regulates the internship in companies for vocational education and training students. It allows companies to host students for practical training if they meet specific criteria for training space, equipment and qualified personnel, as determined by the Center for Vocational Education and Training and approved by the chambers.⁸All four-year secondary vocational education and training programs now include a mandatory work-based learning component in the third and fourth years, as well as a mandatory summer internship. However, the system is essentially school-driven; **North Macedonia currently does not have a fully separate formal apprenticeship track** in the

⁸ https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl_factsheet_north_macedonia_2020.pdf#:~:text=The%20Law%20on%20Vocational%20Education,in%20place%20in%20North%20Macedonia



German sense (except for pilot projects in certain schools). In 2021, the introduction of a dual education system in vocational education began. The law introducing dual education was adopted on January 3, 2025. The business sector is adapting to the dual education process by training mentors in companies, and all the obligations they need to fulfill according to the law. However, apprenticeship as an employment opportunity for young people has never been legally revived because the competent institutions have not found a module for paying apprentices, although it is defined in the law.⁹ Additionally, according to the law, *“only craftsmen who have passed the master’s examination at level VB in the NRC and mentors are allowed to accept students for practical training”* in the craft.¹⁰ This law thus attempts to ensure the quality of training, but it also limits the number of trainers. Many small craft businesses may not have a master craftsman on staff, effectively prohibiting them from formally engaging in vocational education and training practices.

- The Law **on Crafts** provides much more detailed regulation of apprenticeship compared to the Law on Labor Relations, but despite this, there are serious gaps and ambiguities that cause practical problems. Although the law regulates the rights and obligations of the apprentice and the craftsman, as well as the duration, conditions for concluding a contract and control of its implementation, it is still not clear enough whether the apprenticeship contract has the character of an **employment contract** or is exclusively a **civil law training contract**. Such lack of definition places the apprentice in a “gray zone” between an employee and a student, which leaves open questions about social and labor protection, as well as the recognition of experience. In addition, although a minimum monthly allowance is provided for, it amounts to only **15% of the average gross salary**, which is significantly lower than the minimum wage and insufficiently guarantees the economic security of apprentices, especially if the apprenticeship lasts up to 12 months. At the same time, the law does not provide sufficiently precise mechanisms for the protection of apprentices in the event that the employer fails to fulfill its obligations – for example, untimely payment of compensation, insufficient occupational safety or lack of quality training.

This law defines an apprentice as a person who is at least 15 years old and unemployed. However, experience to date indicates that the definition is too

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https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2021/trud/strategija_vrabortuvanje_2021_eng.pdf#:~:text=1,skills%20learning%20in%20primary%20and

¹⁰ [https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-](https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl_factsheet_north_macedonia_2020.pdf#:~:text=This%20training%20is%20mandatory%20for,How%20does%20cooperation%20between)

[09/wbl_factsheet_north_macedonia_2020.pdf#:~:text=This%20training%20is%20mandatory%20for,How%20does%20cooperation%20between](https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl_factsheet_north_macedonia_2020.pdf#:~:text=This%20training%20is%20mandatory%20for,How%20does%20cooperation%20between)



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general and creates confusion in practical application. The most common dilemma faced by craftsmen is **whether an apprentice can be a person who is a full-time student in secondary education and at the same time wants to study a trade in parallel**. Since the law explicitly requires the person to be unemployed, and does not specify whether the status of a full-time student is excluded or allowed, a legal gap is created that is resolved differently in practice, often according to the craftsmen's or institutions' own interpretation. This indicates the need for greater harmonisation and precision in defining the status of an apprentice, especially in relation to young people who are in the process of formal education, but also want practical vocational training.

- **The law for labor relations** in Article 56, within the framework of the regulations on apprenticeship, highlights a certain legal and terminological inconsistency in relation to the use of the term **“apprentice”**. Namely, the law clearly defines an **“apprentice”** as a person who starts work for the first time in accordance with the type and level of his/her education, with the aim of training to independently perform the work in an employment relationship. However, immediately afterwards, in paragraph (2), the term **“apprentice” is introduced**, stating that “an apprentice who has successfully completed the vocational training program is qualified to independently perform the work”. In this way, in the same context and article, two different terms are used that essentially refer to an identical goal – acquiring practical skills and independence in performing the work. The problem arises from the fact that the Law on Labor Relations nowhere previously defines the term “apprentice”, nor does it explain whether it is part of the apprenticeship regime or represents a completely different category.

Additionally, “apprentice” is already legally regulated by a separate law – the Law on Crafts – where it is linked to apprenticeship/craft education and practical training. The inclusion of this term in the text of the Law on Labor Relations, without clarification and without reference to the special law, creates legal ambiguity and room for ambiguous interpretations. In practice, such a gap leaves open questions: does an “apprentice” enjoy the same rights and obligations as an intern under this article; is his experience treated as an apprenticeship; should he have an employment contract or does his status remain within the domain of craft practice. Instead of clarifying the difference between an intern and an apprentice, the law implicitly equates them, thereby losing precision and legal certainty.¹¹ This law implies that early professional engagement is legally possible (with protection), but in practice there are few structured opportunities for persons under 15 years of age, except for informal family work. However, until recently there was no stand-alone apprenticeship program within the labor system - apprenticeships were

¹¹ <https://globalnaps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/business-and-human-rights-guide-to-macedonia-english.pdf#:~:text=Macedonia%20globalnaps,as%20participants%20in%20an>



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primarily within the vocational education and training in schools or the craft framework .

- **The Law on Internships** was adopted in 2019 to regulate informal internships. It allows companies to hire *"any unemployed citizen under 34 years of age with at least primary education"*¹² as an intern for a period of 1 to 6 months. The law limits one internship per young person per employer and mandates a certain remuneration (scaled according to the length of the internship). This law fills a legal gap by providing rights and clarity for post-educational internships (outside of mandatory school internships). It complements active work programs by providing a framework for the government or employers to offer internships with minimum standards.

Gap 2 - Regulatory gaps in work-based learning : Although North Macedonia has several laws that separately regulate internships in companies (the Law on Vocational Education and Training), apprenticeships (the Law on Crafts), apprenticeships (the Law on Labor Relations), and internships (the Law on Interns), there is a lack of a single and harmonized framework that clearly defines the concepts, status, rights, and obligations of young people who learn through work. The Law on VET provides for mandatory internships in schools and started with dual education, but apprenticeships as a classic form did not take off due to the unresolved issue of payment. The Law on Crafts defines an apprentice as an unemployed person over 15 years of age, thus excluding the possibility for secondary school students to formally be apprentices, which in practice creates dilemmas and different interpretations. The Law on Labor Relations introduces additional inconsistency by using the term “apprentice” without defining it, leaving it in an unclear relationship with “trainee.” Finally, the Law on Internships only regulates short-term post-educational practices for unemployed people up to 34 years of age, but does not touch on training during secondary education. This fragmented and disconnected regulation results in a legal gap and an unclear division between apprentice, intern and trainee, which creates uncertainty both for young people seeking training and for companies and craftsmen who want to offer work-based learning.

Recommendation: It is necessary to implement a systematic harmonisation and amendment of the legal framework governing apprenticeship and work-based learning. There are gaps and inconsistencies in the current regulation that cause practical dilemmas, mostly because the term “apprentice” is defined too narrowly and at the same time too generally – as a person over 15 years of age who is unemployed – without taking into account the different forms of work-based learning that actually exist in practice. Experience so far shows that craftsmen and educational institutions often face the

¹² <https://ogletree.com/international-employment-update/articles/july-2020/north-macedonia/2020-06-08/north-macedonias-new-laws-on-internships-the-minimum-wage-and-changes-to-taxation-and-social-security-subsidization-laws/#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20the%20Parliament%20of,outside%20of%20the%20educational%20process>



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question of whether a person who is a full-time student in secondary education can be involved in apprenticeship in parallel, which creates legal uncertainty and uneven application of the law.

In this regard, it is necessary to introduce a clear and modern definition that will encompass the broader concept of work-based learning, aligned with European standards and policies for vocational education and training. Instead of limiting it exclusively to unemployed persons, access should be provided to pupils, students and other categories who wish to acquire practical skills, with a clear demarcation of their rights and obligations. In addition, it is advisable that the Law on Crafts and the Law on Labor Relations be harmonized and mutually complementary, instead of introducing different or undefined terms (“apprentice” in one and “trainee” in the other), as this inconsistency leads to misinterpretations and limited legal protection.

3. Youth participation and co-creation in policies

North Macedonia took a significant step in January 2020 with the adoption of **the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies**.¹³, which aims to institutionalize the inclusion of young people in the decision-making process. The law requires each of the 81 municipalities to establish **Local Youth Councils** and adopt Local Youth Strategies, and also provides for a **National Youth Advisory Body** with representatives from youth organizations and state institutions to advise on youth policies.¹⁴ This legal framework recognizes young people as stakeholders in shaping employment, education, and entrepreneurship policies. In addition, the National Youth Council of Macedonia¹⁵ (NYM, a network of youth NGOs) is an important voice, and there is an informal **Parliamentary Club on Youth Issues** to bring together MPs from all parties with youth groups.

However, implementation lags behind, and the influence of young people in practice remains limited:

Gap 3 – Limited voice of youth in policy development: *Young people are not consistently or meaningfully involved in policy-making that affects their employment and education, despite formal provisions.* More than three years after the Law on Youth Participation, **the majority of municipalities have not complied** – only 19 out of 81 had established Local Youth Councils by mid-2021 (around 23%).¹⁶ This slow implementation

¹³ <https://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Issues/862649465cf4432aadcb4119f52bfd81.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/14-youth-policy-decision-making#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Law%20on,establishing%20Local%20Youth%20Councils>

¹⁵ <https://www.nms.org.mk/>

¹⁶ <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/14-youth-policy-decision-making#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Law%20on,establishing%20Local%20Youth%20Councils>



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means that many local governments lack structured youth input into economic development or education initiatives. At the national level, **the National Youth Advisory Body**, which is mandated by law, has in fact never met (*“initial steps [were taken in 2021], but the body has not yet been formally established”*). Consequently, there is no regular platform where young people can co-create or at least critique national strategies for youth employment or vocational education. Consultations tend to be ad hoc – for example, youth representatives (NYCM) were consulted in the revision of the Youth Employment Action Plan 2016-2020 and the planning of the Youth Guarantee, but *“young people and youth organisations are not always consulted”* at all levels. This participation gap can lead to policies that do not fully reflect young people’s needs or innovative ideas. For example, issues such as precarious work, digital freelance work or mental health – which young people themselves might prioritise – could be under-addressed if young people are not involved. Moreover, without co-ownership by young people, even well-intentioned programmes (e.g. entrepreneurship funds or training schemes) could experience low uptake or trust among the target group.

Recommendation: Fully implement the 2020 Law on Youth Participation by accelerating the establishment of **Local Youth Councils** and **the National Youth Advisory Body** . The government should set clear deadlines and possibly provide incentives or support (through the new Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth and partners such as the OSCE, which has already developed a “Handbook for Local Youth Councils” ¹⁷) to municipalities to create youth councils and strategies. At the national level, convening a Youth Advisory Body with equal representation from the youth sector and institutions would create a formal channel for co-creation – for example, youth delegates could review and contribute to any new updates to the Education or Employment Strategy. In addition, systematically integrate young people into the strategy working groups: as noted, the inclusion of NMSM in the design of the Youth Guarantee has proven useful, so this practice should be extended to all major reforms (dual education committees, economic councils, etc.). **Youth councils and organisations should have consultative status** in the bodies overseeing active employment measures and educational reforms. Finally, participatory processes such as hackathons, policy labs or EU youth dialogues should be promoted at national level (currently, *“there is still no national working group on EU youth dialogue”*).¹⁸) to collect contributions from grassroots youth. Strengthening youth participation will not only empower young people, but will also improve the relevance and effectiveness of policies.

4. Skills assessment and validation of non-formal learning

¹⁷ https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/mladi/priracnik_lokalni_mladinski_soveti.pdf

¹⁸ <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/14-youth-policy-decision-making#:~:text=EU%20Youth%20Dialogue%20,mechanism%20on%20the%20European%20level>



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A significant proportion of young people in North Macedonia acquire skills outside formal channels – be it through family businesses (a young person helping with a parent’s craft), self-employment in the informal economy or online freelancing. The recognition and certification of these skills is key for mobility and employability. North Macedonia has a **National Qualifications Framework**¹⁹ in force since 2013 (aligned with European standards), which conceptually allows for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning²⁰. In policies, **validation of prior learning** has been identified as a priority in the strategies for vocational education and training and adult education, and pilot projects have been implemented for certain occupations. A *draft* legal act describing the validation system for prior learning was developed in 2019 as part of the update of the Law on Adult Education. This will allow individuals to undergo assessment and obtain certificates for competences acquired outside formal education, aligned with the levels of the National Qualifications Framework. For example, an apprentice trained informally by a craftsman or a young person who learned coding online could have those skills validated.

Gap 4 – Partial operationalization of skills validation despite legal adoption: North Macedonia adopted the new Law on Adult Education²¹ on 27 December 2024, formally establishing a system for the recognition of prior learning. However, implementation is still at an early stage, with limited operational mechanisms, institutional readiness and public awareness.

The updated **Adult Education Act (Official Gazette No. 308/2024)** introduces **Chapter VII: Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning**, which for the first time provides a full legal basis for individuals to assess and validate their informally acquired skills. According to Articles 51–57 of the Act:

- **validation** process includes counseling, documentation of competencies, assessment, and certification.
- Validation is available to every adult citizen, regardless of how or where the skills were acquired (including through work, volunteering or self-study).
- **Adult Education Center**, in cooperation with **licensed validation service providers**, is responsible for the implementation of this system.
- Validated skills must be aligned with **the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)**, and certificates should be issued in accordance with its levels.

¹⁹ <https://registar.mrk.mk/>

²⁰ https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-06/North%20Macedonia%202023_0.pdf#:~:text=a%20system%20for%20validation%20on,its%20NQF%20is%20at%20the

²¹ https://cov.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Microsoft-Word-Sluzben-del-3_2025.pdf#



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This represents a **major legal step forward** . However, although **the law is now in force** , challenges in its implementation still exist:

- By mid-2025, **validation centers are still not fully operational** or accredited across the country.
- **Occupational standards and assessment procedures** for many professions (especially in the craft sector or digital freelancing) are still lacking or under development.
- **Trained personnel (assessors, advisors)** and institutional capacity remain limited.
- **Public awareness is low** , especially among marginalized youth or those outside formal education and employment.
- there is a **national platform or clear roadmap** for increasing access to validation across regions and sectors.

In fact, although the law has closed **the legal gap** , there is still a **gap in policy implementation** – particularly affecting young people in **informal or family craft environments** , **freelancers** or **those who have left school** and are seeking recognition for practical competences.

Recommendation: The Center for **Adult Education** , in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science and the Center for Vocational Education and Training, should prioritize **the introduction of validation services** in 2025–2026. This includes:

- Accreditation and equipping of **regional validation centers** , especially in areas with high NEET numbers of youth or strong craft traditions.
- Develop and publish **criteria and assessment tools** for key occupations (starting with trades, services and ICT-related roles).
- Training of **assessors and advisors** , potentially leveraging donor support (e.g., ETF, GIZ).
- Launch a **national awareness-raising campaign** targeting youth, small and medium-sized enterprises, and informal workers.
- Ensuring that **validated qualifications are transferable and considered for further education or employment pathways** , in line with the NQF.

With the legal framework in place, North Macedonia must move from a **legal obligation to practical implementation** , ensuring that all young people – regardless of their learning path – can access fair recognition and certification of their skills.

5. Involving SMEs in training

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which represent over 98% of businesses in North Macedonia, play a crucial role in providing practical opportunities for young people.



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Their active involvement in the work-based learning system – through apprenticeships, internships or mentoring – is crucial for linking education with the labour market. North Macedonia has introduced several initiatives in recent years to support this process, including legislative changes enabling dual education and subsidised practical training programmes. However, despite these steps, actual implementation is limited: the number of companies providing formalised training remains small, and practical cooperation is mostly based on individual agreements and personal contacts between schools and companies.

Gap 5 – Insufficient incentives and high burdens for the inclusion of small and medium-sized enterprises in training: *Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), including craft businesses, face legal/administrative obstacles and a lack of strong incentives to participate in youth training (internships, apprenticeships, mentoring).* On paper, North Macedonia has introduced some measures to encourage employers - for example, **financial subsidies in the Operational Plan 2024** for youth internships and apprenticeships (e.g. wage subsidies, training grants) ²² and other incentive schemes noted in OECD reports ²³. According to the new Law on Vocational Education (Article 20 paragraph 1 point 5) an employer is entitled to financial, tax and customs relief and other benefits if it is involved in practical dual education. However, these efforts have not fully addressed the underlying obstacle: **the lack of employers offering employment opportunities** for students. Many companies, especially small craft businesses, find compliance and costs to be an obstacle. **Regulatory requirements** are strict - companies must invest in specific training space and equipment and have staff trained as mentors.²⁴ **The Vocational Education and Training Centre and the chambers require mentors in companies to undergo training-of-trainers programmes**, but “no regular funds are allocated” to finance these capacity-building trainings ²⁵. In fact, an SME that wants to be a trainer of an apprentice or trainee may have to pay for mentor training and build its own capacities without external support. For a micro-enterprise, this is a heavy burden. Craft workshops also need a master training licence, which not all have. These factors **deter many small businesses from engaging** in formal work-based learning. Instead, cooperation between schools and companies often relies on informal personal contacts

²² <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/32-administration-and-governance#:~:text=The%20newly%20adopted%C2%A02024%20Operational%20Plan,Youth%20Guarantee%2C%20ensuring%20that%20young>

²³ https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/06/western-balkans-competitiveness-outlook-2024-north-macedonia_4dc5c34c/8207326d-en.pdf#:~:text=North%20Macedonia%20has%20also%20made,4%20The%20Centre%20for

²⁴ https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl_factsheet_north_macedonia_2020.pdf#:~:text=Companies%20are%20permitted%20to%20conduct,in%20place%20in%20North%20Macedonia

²⁵ https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl_factsheet_north_macedonia_2020.pdf#:~:text=guidance%20of%20and%20in%20close,VET%20students%20for%20practical%20training



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and goodwill; “the organisation of practical training in companies is relatively limited... it is usually based on individual agreements arising from personal contacts”, rather than on a systematic, widespread network. Furthermore, there are no explicit tax breaks for school-based firms – unlike in some neighboring countries, recent reforms in North Macedonia did not include, for example, covering part of the social contributions of potential interns from the state budget (Montenegro has introduced such a subsidy)²⁶. The rigid rules **of the Labor Law on temporary contracts and apprenticeship contracts** are also cited as a limitation, which disproportionately affects young people.²⁷

Recommendation: To close this gap, the government should improve **incentive packages** and simplify requirements for companies. Building on existing Operational Plan programs, consider **tax breaks or subsidies for social security contributions** for companies hosting apprentices or trainees (e.g., reimbursement of employer training costs or scholarships for trainees for the training period). Simplifying the accreditation process for training firms – possibly allowing experienced craftsmen who are not yet masters to train under supervision or fast-tracking the acquisition of master certification – would expand the pool of potential mentors. It is also crucial to **finance “train the trainers” programs** : as noted, mandatory mentor training currently lacks regular funding.²⁸ Allocating public funds or donor support to cover these trainings would ease the burden on SMEs and improve quality. In addition, the creation of local or sectoral **bodies (e.g. sector skills councils or chamber liaison offices)** can help connect vocational schools and young people with ready companies, reducing the reliance on personal networks. In short, a more business-friendly approach – **reducing administrative barriers and increasing incentives** – is needed to motivate greater private sector participation in youth training.

6. Standards of occupation

Aligning educational programs with labor market needs is a strategic priority for North Macedonia, especially in the context of vocational education reforms and the introduction of the dual system. A key instrument for this alignment are occupational standards, which provide a clear definition of the competencies that future workers should possess. Although the process of their development is institutionally established and involves multiple actors – chambers, ministries, employers’ associations, educational institutions,

²⁶

https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3084_en.pdf#:~:text=Amendments%20to%20different%20laws%20in,year%20educational%20programmes

²⁷ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/809991603810854005/pdf/Republic-of-North-Macedonia-Action-Plan-for-Recovery-of-Growth-and-Jobs.pdf#:~:text=,In%20addition%2C%20the%20minimum>

²⁸ https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl_factsheet_north_macedonia_2020.pdf#:~:text=This%20training%20is%20mandatory%20for,How%20does%20cooperation%20between

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trade unions and the Center for Vocational Education and Training – in practice there are significant obstacles that slow down its implementation.

Gap 6 - Long administrative procedures for the development of occupational standards as a basis for harmonizing education with the needs of the labor market. The initiative for revising the existing or developing a new occupational standard (hereinafter: Initiative) is launched by the relevant chambers, ministries, employers' associations, educational institutions, ZELS, the trade union and the Center for Vocational Education and Training or other legal entities, in accordance with the requirements and needs of the labor market. The development consists of several phases: initiative, organization, development, adoption, monitoring and innovation of an occupational standard.

The longest and most complex phase is the adoption phase, as it involves multiple institutions (CVET, Ministry of Education and Science – MES and Ministry of Economy and Labor). The phase begins with the Center for Vocational Education and Training notifying the proposer of the completed activities and submitting a letter to the chambers and ministries (Ministry of Education and Science and Ministry of Economy and Labor) inviting them to a public debate, after the draft occupational standard has been prepared, for its harmonization with the area of labor to which the occupation belongs.

This is followed by a review of the occupational standard by the Council for Vocational Education and Training. The Vocational Education and Training Council submits the harmonized draft occupational standard for review to the Council for Vocational Education and Training. The Council for Vocational Education and Training, within 10 working days of submission, reviews the draft occupational standard. After reviewing the occupational standard, it issues an opinion, which it submits in writing to the Center, within five working days. The Sector for Development of Standards and Curricula and Programs organizes the work to act on the remarks and submits the corrected occupational standard to the Council for Vocational Education and Training for reconsideration, within 10 working days. The Center submits the archived occupational standard, with a positive opinion from the Council, to the Ministry of Education and Science, which processes it to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy for its adoption. The Minister of Labor and Social Policy, upon a proposal from the Ministry of Education and Science, adopts a decision on the occupational standard and submits it to the Center. The occupational standard, with the decision number, is published on the Center's website . **In practice, this causes prolongation of deadlines and creates an administrative burden that significantly slows down the process of adopting new or revised occupational standards.**

Recommendation : After the preparation of the occupational standard by the working group for preparation, a joint working group for adoption should be formed consisting of representatives of the VET, MES and MLSP. This group, within 15 days of preparation, would review and adopt the standard, which would then be confirmed by a joint decision signed by the competent institutions. This approach would avoid the long procedure of individual submission and archiving of documentation through three institutions, would shorten the duration of the entire procedure and would ensure faster alignment of educational programs with the real needs of the labor market.



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Conclusion

North Macedonia has made significant efforts in recent years to improve youth employment policies and strengthen vocational education and training, but the analysis clearly indicates that there are structural gaps that limit the effectiveness of these efforts. Insufficient institutional coordination results in parallel initiatives that are not sufficiently linked, which reduces their effectiveness. Regulatory inconsistencies around work-based learning – the overlapping of the terms apprentice, trainee and intern – create legal uncertainty and different interpretations in practice. Young people are formally recognized as stakeholders in policy-making processes, but their participation remains limited, especially at the local level. In addition, the system for validation of skills and recognition of non-formal and informal learning, although legally established, still lacks sufficient institutional and operational support to deliver concrete results. Finally, high administrative and financial barriers for small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as lengthy procedures for developing occupational standards, limit the possibilities for more extensive involvement of the private sector and for faster alignment of education with the needs of the labor market.

These gaps also represent opportunities: better coordination of institutions, harmonization of the legal framework for work-based learning, active inclusion of youth in political processes, full implementation of the skills validation system, and reduction of administrative burdens for companies. By addressing them through concrete reforms and coordinated measures, North Macedonia can create a more functional and inclusive system that will enable young people to transition from education to employment more quickly and securely and will increase their contribution to the economy and society.

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