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ЗАЈАКНУВАЊЕ НА МЛАДИТЕ ГРАДЕЊЕ ВЕШТИНИ, КРЕИРАЊЕ ИДНИНА

Strategic proposal for inclusion of youth in the public and private sectors

Project: "Empowering Youth: Building Skills, Creating the Future"

IPA III/2024 453-365

Implementer: Skopje Chamber of Crafts

Author on document : Association on small and medium enterprises on Macedonia

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Проектот е имплементиран од страна на: Занаетчиска комора Скопје, АМПЕРСАНД и АСМЕ

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Introduction and purpose

The Republic of North Macedonia faces a significant challenge: the youth unemployment rate (ages 15–24) in 2023 was around 28.6%, significantly higher than the global average of 16%. In addition, the unemployment rate for young people aged 15–29 reached 25.4%. This means that approximately one in four young people is not in education, employment or training – and double the overall unemployment rate of 12.9%.

In the development and implementation of this strategic proposal, a key role is played by several public and private institutions, whose actions are essential for promoting the involvement of young people in craft professions and vocational education. Consultations with them indicated serious structural inconsistencies – students acquire academic theoretical skills, but do not have enough practical learning. The combination of outdated teaching staff and the lack of modern practical workshops reduces the subsidiary value of VET.

The aim of this proposal is to create a functional framework for the introduction and institutional support of practical learning through dual and mentoring programs, with a focus on craftsmanship. In this context, economic sectors where there is a clear demand for skilled personnel are highlighted: **metal processing, wood industry, electrical industry, auto mechanics, hairdressing, catering and construction**, and numerous SMEs and large companies (Kemet Electronics, Kostal, Johnson Matthey, Ading, Brako...), which are ready to employ young people from VET, are also resonating at night.

1. Diagnosis of the condition: problems and potential

In Macedonia, young people with vocational education often leave the country or remain inactive because they fail to find a suitable position. Business consultations confirmed that the “school-practical training-employer” chain is broken due to:

1.1. Lack of modern practical laboratories and workshops.

One of the most significant systemic challenges in vocational education and training (VET) in North Macedonia is the absence of modern, technically equipped and functional practical laboratories and workshops within vocational secondary schools. This situation directly affects the quality of practical teaching, which is an essential element in craft and technical professions.

Many schools have outdated equipment, non-functional workspaces, or a complete lack of tools and machines that meet current industry standards. As a result, students are unable to acquire practical skills on equipment that is actually used in companies and workshops, creating a serious gap between the educational process and the real demands of the labor market.



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This shortcoming reduces the attractiveness of vocational education among young people and parents, and at the same time discourages employers from hiring students, as they have to additionally train them from scratch. Without serious investments in the modernization of laboratories – through public funds, public-private partnerships or EU projects – vocational education will not be able to fulfill its essential function: to create prepared, competent and immediately employable young people.

1.2. Inadequate coordination between the Vocational Training Center, the Ministry of Education and Science and companies.

Although there are mechanisms for formal cooperation between educational institutions and the business community, there is a serious lack of structured, long-term and effective coordination on the ground. The Vocational Education and Training Commission as the expert body for curriculum development, the Ministry of Education and Science as the bearer of educational policy, and companies as the end users of the staff, are not connected through common platforms for regular exchange of information, needs and innovative practices.

In practice, curricula are revised without sufficient involvement of industry representatives, leading to inadequately aligned skills. At the same time, companies often express reluctance to engage in practical training due to administrative barriers, distrust in the process, or insufficient support from the state.

This fragmentation results in disconnected efforts, duplication of activities and limited impact on youth employability. An institutionalized mechanism for ongoing coordination – such as joint committees, advisory bodies or digital platforms – is needed, where all stakeholders have a role in planning, monitoring and improving VET.

1.3. Insufficient regulatory and financial support for craft workshops and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) engaging in training.

Craft workshops and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent an important link in the chain of vocational education, especially when it comes to providing realistic conditions for practical teaching and learning through work. However, in practice, these legal entities face serious limitations in their attempts to become an active part of the educational process.

On the one hand, there are limited economic incentives that could encourage employers to include vocational education students in their production or service process. Currently, fiscal incentives, subsidies or compensation for material costs and working time are either unavailable or insufficiently known and used. In addition, the regulations governing the engagement of students in the work environment are often incomplete, inflexible or administratively burdensome, which creates obstacles rather than support.

In practice, many craftsmen who would have the capacity and willingness to transfer knowledge and skills to younger generations give up due to a lack of institutional support – such as standardized training for mentors, legal certainty when working with underage interns, and financial support for costs related to materials, safety, and logistics.

In addition, SMEs are rarely recognized as active actors in the education system. They are often excluded from calls for support for training and development, especially when these programs focus on large systems or institutionalized training. Although they have the potential

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to offer quality, personalized practical training, their participation is often reduced to individual initiatives rather than systemic involvement.

This lack of consistent, predictable and functional support leads to a limited capacity for young people to gain practical experience during their education. Without formalized and encouraged cooperation with these enterprises, the implementation of dual education remains limited, and the effects on youth employability – minimal. Systemic intervention is needed through regulatory changes, financial mechanisms and structures to continuously support SMEs and craftsmen in their role as partners in education.

2. Key institutions and their responsibilities

The implementation of effective policies for the inclusion of young people in vocational education and crafts, as well as their activation in the labor market, depends on the coordinated action of several key institutions. Each of them has a clearly defined competence and role, but also a responsibility to act in sync with other stakeholders in the process.

2.1. Ministry of Education and Science (MES)

The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) is the main bearer of educational policies in the Republic of North Macedonia and has a central role in strategic planning, standardization and implementation of reforms in vocational education and training (VET). Given the significant transformation of the labor market and the growing demand for technical and vocational skills, MES is responsible for conducting a systematic review of existing curricula and initiating their alignment with the real needs of the economy.

In addition, the Ministry should prepare and enable a normative framework for the full implementation of dual education, including establishing standardized obligations for schools and companies, evaluation mechanisms and legal protection for students participating in practical training. One of the key responsibilities of the MES is to plan budget funds or provide access to donor funds for equipping practical laboratories, workshops and technical infrastructure in schools offering vocational education.

2.2. Vocational Education and Training Center (VETC)

The Vocational Education and Training Center (VETC), as a vocational institution under the authority of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, has an operational function in the development and implementation of VET programs. The VETC is responsible for designing teaching modules that include a practical component, and for ensuring the quality of vocational education through clear standards, criteria and quality control mechanisms.

At the same time, the Center has a mandate to establish and maintain functional links between vocational schools and enterprises – primarily through arranging and supervising practical training with employers. The CVEO should develop and administer a system for licensing mentors, i.e. masters who will work with students in companies, in order to ensure a quality, structured and safe environment for learning through work.

2.3. RSM Employment Agency



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The Employment Agency has a key role in the implementation of active employment measures, including programs aimed at young people, such as subsidized internships, financial support for first employment and training with employers. Through its regional offices, the Agency should identify young people who are active job seekers and connect them with companies ready to offer practical training or employment.

Additionally, the Agency can be a channel for informing and promoting opportunities for dual education among young people from vulnerable groups, as well as a mechanism for assessing the impact of implemented programs by monitoring employment after completed training.

2.4. Ministry of Economy and Labor

The Ministry of Economy and Labor has a key role in developing employment policies, economic development and linking education to labor market needs. In the context of involving young people in vocational education and crafts, the Ministry should provide measures that will facilitate the transition from school to work, by stimulating employment in companies that accept young interns or employ them after completing their education.

Additionally, the Ministry is obliged to initiate and support economic measures that encourage the business community – especially small and medium-sized enterprises – to cooperate with vocational schools. This may include fiscal incentives, public calls for grants, as well as coordination with agencies and chambers of commerce towards creating a structured system of on-the-job training.

2.5. Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth

The Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth is responsible for integrating the youth perspective into public policies and for creating measures aimed at social inclusion and support for young people – especially those from vulnerable categories, such as NEET youth (persons not in education, training or employment). In the context of vocational education and crafts, the Ministry has an obligation to ensure that young people have access to social services, support in the transition to employment, as well as participation in the creation of policies that affect them.

This Ministry should also play a coordinating role in the development of programs for mental health, motivation, mobility and active youth involvement in the community, as factors that directly affect the ability of young people to integrate into the labor market. Thus, its role is complemented by economic measures, creating a holistic approach to supporting young people.

2.6. Local governments

Municipalities, as bearers of some of the responsibilities in education, have an obligation to support the integration of young people into the local economy. Through local economic councils, education and employment sectors, as well as vocational education development councils, local governments can play the role of mediators between schools and local companies.

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They should provide infrastructural support (spaces, technical resources), initiate and coordinate memorandums of understanding, and organize public events to promote crafts and vocational education among young people and their parents. At the same time, local governments can be drivers of public-private partnerships for equipping schools or establishing joint skills centers.

2.7. Private sector

Enterprises – especially craft workshops, small and medium-sized enterprises, but also larger industrial capacities – are the key partners in the process of providing real practical training. They should offer concrete opportunities for work-based learning, internships, mentoring and further employment. In order to be motivated to participate, they need to receive appropriate institutional support, including financial incentives, training for mentors, as well as public promotion of their social role.

Examples from companies such as Kemet Electronics, Johnson Matthey, Brako, but also from numerous local craft entities, indicate that the business sector is ready to engage under conditions that are clearly defined, predictable and supported by institutions .

3. Proposed measures and activities

3.1. Aligning Educational Programs with Labor Market Needs

The effective integration of young people into the labor market begins with an educational system that is responsive to the current and future needs of the industry. It requires the systematic establishment of mechanisms for continuous revision and adjustment of curricula.

3.1.1. Collaborative development and modification of curricula:

In order to establish a systemic, structural and long-term connection between the education system and the real demands of the labor market, the formation of intersectoral expert working bodies will be initiated, with a mandate to conduct continuous analysis of economic trends and propose adaptive solutions for the modernization of curriculum content and educational standards.

These bodies will be multidisciplinary in composition, with representation from:

- The Ministry of Education and Science (MES), as the bearer of systemic educational policies and regulations;
- The Ministry of Economy and Labor, with a focus on sectoral development strategies and market regulation;
- The Employment Agency of the Republic of Macedonia, as the creator and operator of active labor market measures and collector of relevant data on employment and skills demand;
- higher education institutions and universities, as key actors in the creation and delivery of highly specialized educational profiles;
- secondary vocational schools, as direct carriers of dual, technical and vocational education programs;



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- representatives of the private sector, organized through chambers of commerce and crafts, as well as industry associations and cluster structures.

The main function of these bodies will be to permanently monitor the transformations in the labor market, through the inclusion of empirical data, reports on deficit profiles, and trends in technological and industrial transformation. By identifying skills gaps, a basis will be provided for formulating specific recommendations for reprogramming educational content and integrating new technical, digital and transferable (soft) competencies into curricula at all levels of education – primary, secondary and higher.

These recommendations will encompass not only general adaptation of curricula but also the introduction of new subjects, modular content, specializations and elective programs that will respond to the changing dynamics of economic sectors. In doing so, special attention will be paid to incorporating skills for adaptability, entrepreneurship, digital literacy, environmental sustainability and interdisciplinary thinking, as key competencies for the modern labor market.

Additionally, it is proposed to institutionalize "Industrial Councils" at the level of universities and secondary vocational schools, which will function as advisory bodies with a permanent character, and will have the task of ensuring a direct link between the teaching-educational process and the practical requirements of the industrial sectors. These councils will include representatives from the business sector, teaching staff, alumni networks and local communities, and will act as a mechanism for rapid reaction and adaptation of education to industrial changes.

The institutionalization of these bodies and councils will contribute to the formation of a functional and evidence-based basis for educational planning, which will replace ad-hoc approaches and strengthen the state's capacity for progressive and inclusive human capital management.

3.1.2. Expanding and supporting dual education and work-based learning systems:

In the context of rapid changes in the labor market and the growing need for young people with practical, applicable skills, the need for a systematic strengthening and expansion of dual education and work-based learning models is imposed. To this end, the state must establish clearly defined regulatory, operational and financial mechanisms that will ensure long-term sustainability and trust among all stakeholders – educational institutions, students, and, above all, the private sector.

From a normative perspective, it is necessary to improve **the legal framework for dual education**, which will define the rights, obligations and standards for companies that accept students for practical training. This includes establishing minimum criteria for the quality of the working environment, occupational safety and health, ethics of behavior towards minor interns, as well as mechanisms for supervision and evaluation by the competent inspection and educational authorities.

In financial terms, the state should develop **incentive support for economic entities** that are actively involved in the process of practical training. This can be realized through:

- tax breaks** for companies that hire vocational education students;



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- **subsidies for training and instructor costs** , in order to cover part of the costs of mentors, materials and equipment;
- **allowances or vouchers** for students to cover costs for transportation, meals and protective equipment during practical training;
- **Priority access to public funds or development programs** for companies that have established formalized partnerships with schools.

A key element of this model is **the active role of economic entities** – from small craft workshops to larger industrial capacities – which should not only provide space for practical training, but also **participate in defining the content and expected results of the training** . To this end, it is necessary to establish frameworks for **cooperation between vocational schools and employers** , based on tripartite agreements that will be legally binding and administratively supported.

In addition, companies that participate in this model will be required to appoint **qualified mentors or trainers** , who will be certified according to standards set by the Center for Vocational Education and Training (CVET), and their role will be supervised by educational institutions and inspection bodies.

The aim of all these measures is **to increase the level of integration of theoretical knowledge with practical training** , so that young people will acquire complete, competitive and transferable skills, and will be better prepared for inclusion in the labor market immediately after completing their education. Such an approach will also enable a reduction in the adaptation period after employment, improve the productivity of young people and increase their retention in the workplace.

3.2. Development of comprehensive professional development and engagement programs

Education is the foundation, but continuous professional development and gaining practical experience are essential for employability.

3.2.1. Establishing national mentoring and career guidance programs

In order to promote the personal and professional development of young people, especially those coming from vocational education and training, it is necessary to establish **a structured and nationally coordinated mentoring and career guidance program** . This program will need to systematically connect young people with experienced professionals from different economic sectors, with a focus on gaining real-world knowledge about the work environment, developing career orientation, and strengthening self-confidence and skills for managing one's own professional path.

Mentoring should be defined not as a one-time training or counseling session, but as **a continuous and structured process of support, guidance and professional modeling** , which is realized within the framework of an academic or calendar year. Young people (mentees) will receive support in recognizing their strengths, setting realistic goals, expanding their professional network and dealing with the challenges of the transition from education to employment.



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The program should be coordinated at the national level, under the leadership of the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science, the Center for Vocational Education and Training (CVET), youth and employment agencies, as well as with the support of the chambers of commerce and crafts.

The private sector, especially companies with a proven track record in youth engagement, should play **a key role in recruiting mentors**. Mentors will be professionals with relevant work experience and recognized competencies, who will contribute to the development of the new workforce, either voluntarily or with institutional support. They will need to undergo a short training or certification in mentoring, in order to ensure the quality of the process and the protection of the mentees.

Within this program, it is proposed to develop and implement **specific components for vulnerable categories of young people**, including NEET youth, youth from rural areas, girls in technical professions, and youth with disabilities. For this purpose, mentors will need to be trained in a diversity-sensitive and inclusion-oriented approach.

As part of modern solutions, a good practice that is recommended is the creation of a **national digital mentoring platform**, which will function as an online system for connecting mentors and mentees. The platform will include:

- Mentor profiles (by sector, experience, location and language),
- A mechanism for connecting based on interests and goals,
- Tools for creating an individual development plan,
- A system for monitoring progress and structured feedback (from both sides),
- An integrated communication tool for educational sessions, advice, and resource sharing.

The platform will contribute to increasing the availability of mentoring for young people from all parts of the country, especially those in rural or less developed areas. It will also ensure transparency, quality and traceability of the process, which is essential for public trust and the long-term sustainability of the program.

3.2.2. Enhanced internship and paid internship programs

In order to improve the transition of young people from the education system to the labor market and to reduce the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience, it is necessary to systematically strengthen **paid internship and work placement programs**. These programs should be structured, with clearly defined goals, a timeframe, learning content and criteria for assessing the acquired skills.

The state, through the Ministry of Economy and Labor and the Employment Agency, in coordination with the Ministry of Education and Science and the Center for Vocational Education and Training (CVET), should establish **a national program for support of internships and practical work**, aimed at students and young people up to 29 years of age. The basic components of this support will be:



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- **Financial incentives for companies** offering paid internship positions, by subsidizing part of the intern's salary/compensation costs, especially in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises;
- **Simplified administrative procedures** for the inclusion of interns, including ready-made contract templates, training guidelines, company guides and online registers;
- **Encourage the transformation of internships into employment**, through additional incentives for companies that retain interns as regular employees after completing the program.

A key element for the quality of these programs is **the definition of an educational component in the internship**, through which the intern will not only perform work tasks, but will have a clear program for learning, skill development, and mentoring support. Every internship program should include:

- Description of expected learning outcomes;
- Activities related to the development of technical, digital and transferable (soft) skills;
- Periodic meetings with the mentor;
- Mechanism for monitoring progress and final evaluation.

Additionally, it is necessary to enable institutional recognition of the experience gained during the internship as part of the young person's educational or professional profile. To this end, the development of formalized mechanisms for recording, recognizing and verifying the skills acquired through internships is recommended.

As an important instrument for increasing the value of internships and strengthening trust between young people and employers, it is recommended **to establish an "Internship Certificate"**, which will formally document the acquired skills and work experience. This certificate should be issued **jointly by the employer and a relevant institution** – such as the Vocational Training Centre, the Employment Agency or the competent Chamber of Commerce/Crafts.

The certificate will contain information about:

- the period and length of the internship;
- description of the work tasks and tools used;
- acquired technical and transferable skills;
- assessment of the quality of the activities performed;
- recommendation from a mentor or supervisor.

That way, the young person will receive an official document that can be submitted when applying for a job, education, or internship positions, and employers will have a standardized framework for confirming successful cooperation.

3.2.3. Targeted initiatives for the development of digital and transferable skills

In light of rapid technological change and increasing automation in most industries, the acquisition of digital and transferable skills is becoming a necessary prerequisite for the active and productive inclusion of young people in the labour market. To this end, it is proposed to develop **nationally coordinated training initiatives** targeting young people – in particular students and graduates of vocational education and training (VET) – that will complement technical qualifications with key skills for the 21st century.

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These trainings should be **co-designed and co-implemented in partnership between the public sector and industry representatives**, including IT companies, consulting organizations, the startup community and digital hubs. The programs will include intensive teaching and practical work in the following areas:

- **basic and advanced digital literacy** (software use, online safety, coding basics);
- **data analysis and visualization** (Excel, Power BI, Tableau);
- **complex problem solving** and innovative thinking;
- **communication and team skills**, with an emphasis on interdisciplinary cooperation;
- **critical thinking**, adaptability and emotional intelligence.

The programs should be **structured as short-term, flexible and results-oriented**, incorporating real-world scenarios and task-based learning, as well as direct mentoring from practitioners. These trainings can be organized as stand-alone intensive courses (bootcamps), included as part of school curricula, or integrated within career centers and skills hubs.

To ensure **long-term sustainability and replicability**, it is proposed to establish a **co-financing system** – where the state and the private sector will share the burden of costs. For example, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth could provide funds through national and EU funds, while industrial partners would participate with direct training, platforms, mentors and certification.

In order to broaden access and encourage active involvement of young people, it is recommended to **introduce a "skills voucher" mechanism**. This is a personalized instrument - financial support from the state - with which young people will be able to **individually choose and attend specialized training with an accredited provider**, according to their interests, professional goals and market demands.

These vouchers will be awarded based on priority criteria (age, level of education, unemployment, NEET status), and the list of providers will be regulated by a state authority (e.g., the Vocational Training Center or the Employment Agency) based on quality and results. Upon completion of the training, the young person will receive a **certificate of value**, recognized by employers, which will confirm his professional development.

This model not only increases access to training and encourages personal professional management, but also reduces institutional inertia and allows for greater dynamism in the system's response to real skills needs in the economy.

3.3. Encouraging entrepreneurship as a path to employability

Entrepreneurship is a key driver of economic growth and innovation, creating new jobs and opportunities for young people.

3.3.1. Development of incubator and accelerator programs with a focus on youth

Young people, especially those coming from vocational education and technical backgrounds, often show innovation, creativity and readiness for self-employment, but at the same time face limited access to basic resources for starting their own business. In this regard, it is necessary

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to establish and strengthen **structured incubator and accelerator programs**, which will be specifically designed to respond to the needs of young entrepreneurs.

These programs should offer **integrated support in three main areas** :

1. **Financial support** – in the form of seed grants, co-financing, service vouchers or access to the instruments of the Innovation and Technological Development Fund (ITDF), as well as support through public calls from local governments;
2. **Infrastructure support** – access to workspaces, equipment, digital infrastructure and technological resources within local innovation centers, business zones or public spaces adapted in cooperation with municipalities;
3. **Expert and mentoring support** – focused on developing business plans, financial modeling, legal framework for registering companies, marketing strategies, branding, and international positioning.

The Innovation and Technological Development Fund (ITDF), as a national instrument for supporting innovation and the start-up ecosystem, should play a leading role in designing programs targeted at youth, through specific budget lines and thematic focus (e.g. youth from rural areas, young women, youth with VET skills).

Local governments should be actively involved by providing spatial capacities, logistical support and networking with local business entities and chambers. They can also initiate local public calls for young innovators, provide symbolic awards, and enable media promotion of success stories.

The private sector, including large companies, corporate funds, banking institutions and business angels, can provide additional support through:

- direct investments in young companies;
- access to markets and suppliers;
- participation in mentoring programs;
- providing real business challenges for startups to solve.

Accelerator programs, as an advanced phase after incubation, will be aimed at young people who already have a developed product or service and need scaling, professionalization and readiness to enter the market. These programs will include intensive work with mentors, preparation for investment pitching, legal support for intellectual property protection and establishment of business models with growth potential.

As an innovative and motivating instrument, it is recommended **to establish a "National Youth Start-up Challenge"**, which would be implemented once a year under the auspices of FITR, the Ministry of Economy and Labor, and in partnership with the private sector.

This competition will aim to identify and support **the most innovative and sustainable youth business solutions**, with a focus on digital economy, green technologies, social entrepreneurship, crafts and service industries. The finalists will receive:

- grants for starting a business;
- promotion and media visibility;
- participation in an accelerator program;



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- mentoring and legal support for company development;
- access to investors and networks of potential partners.

a culture of youth entrepreneurship will be established, an active role of young people in local and national economic development will be encouraged, and the connection between the education system, the private sector and the innovation ecosystem will be strengthened.

3.3.2. Facilitating access to financial resources and incentives for young entrepreneurs

One of the key structural challenges faced by young entrepreneurs is limited access to seed capital and appropriate financial instruments. People under 30, especially those coming from vocational education, often lack a credit history, collateral, or formalized business network, which puts them at a disadvantage when applying for traditional financial products. To overcome these barriers, it is necessary to establish **specifically designed financial mechanisms and incentives** aimed exclusively at young entrepreneurs.

In this regard, the state, through cooperation between the Ministry of Economy and Labor, the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, the Fund for Innovation and Technological Development (FITR), as well as the Employment Agency, should develop a **diversified package of financial support** that includes the following instruments:

- **Subsidized credit lines** for young people up to 29 years of age, with low or zero interest rates, grace periods and minimal collateral requirements. These loans will be aimed at start-up activities, investments in equipment, digitalization and the introduction of innovative business models;
- **Grants for starting your own business**, intended for young people with an entrepreneurial idea, where funding will be linked to the implementation of a clear business plan and periodic monitoring of the achieved results;
- **Tax incentives for newly established companies led by youth**, which will include partial or full exemption from profit tax, personal income tax and social contributions for the first year or the first two years of operation, under conditions defined in a public register;
- **Access to a guarantee fund**, which will enable young entrepreneurs to receive a guarantee from the state when applying for bank loans, in order to reduce the perceived risk with financial institutions.

In parallel, it is necessary to encourage **the active involvement of private financial institutions** – commercial banks, microfinance organizations and investment funds – through regulatory and fiscal incentives for the development of **specialized financial products for youth** (youth credit lines, entrepreneurial startup loans, risk-sharing investments, etc.). This will create healthy competition in the market and increase the available options for young business founders.

One good practice is the establishment of a **“Youth Entrepreneurship Fund”**, as a structured tool for financing young entrepreneurs, with **joint management by the public and private sectors**. This fund would have clearly defined access criteria (age, business idea, local or social impact, technological component) and would include:

- budget component from public sources (state budget, EU funds, FITR);
- investments and donations from private companies, banks and business angels;
- non-financial support such as training, mentoring and promotion.

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The fund can operate with open public calls, annual startup competitions, thematic sessions (e.g. green businesses, social enterprises, digital economy) and regionally targeted interventions, in order to ensure equitable access throughout the country.

This will create systemic support for young people with entrepreneurial potential, which will not only reduce the financial barrier to entry, but will also send a clear message that innovation, independence, and entrepreneurship are valued and supported in the national economic strategy.

3.4. Promoting inclusiveness and targeted access

Successful youth employability strategies must be inclusive, recognizing that not all young people have the same starting positions or opportunities. A targeted approach to vulnerable groups is needed.

3.4.1. Specialized programs for vulnerable youth

Young people from vulnerable social categories – including young people from rural and underdeveloped areas, young people with disabilities, members of ethnic minorities, young people living without parental care or who have dropped out of formal education – face **multiple and interconnected barriers** to accessing the labour market. These barriers include limited access to quality education, lack of professional networks, social stigmatization, discrimination, and a lack of employment support services.

To ensure **equity and functional inclusiveness in youth employment measures**, it is necessary to design and implement **specialized programs**, which will be adapted to the specific needs and capacities of these target groups. These programs should be implemented within the framework of coordination between:

- **Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth** – as the bearer of social and youth policy;
- **The Employment Agency** – through its mobile teams and regional offices;
- **Social work centers and local governments** – through an individualized social approach;
- **civil society organizations and associations working with marginalized groups**;
- **vocational schools and educational institutions**, which will offer adapted content.

The programs will include **four integrated components** :

1. **Individual counseling and support** – includes assessment of personal and social needs, career counseling, mental health and mobility, with each young participant having a personal counselor (coordinator) who will monitor the process;
2. **Adapted skills training** – developed in collaboration with professional institutions and employers, will include:
 - basic and technical skills (e.g. sewing, electrical, hairdressing, handicrafts);
 - digital skills for youth with disabilities (e.g. WordPress basics, online support, visual design with adapted tools);
 - Soft skills training – self-confidence, business communication, work ethic.
3. **Supported practical work** – young people from these groups will be involved in a controlled work environment at prepared companies and institutions, with the presence of trained mentors and clear work tasks. During the practice, they will receive logistical

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and social support in order to mitigate possible obstacles (transport, adaptation, safety).

4. **Active employment mediation and job retention** – hiring specialized job counselors who will work directly with companies to remove stigma, create inclusive jobs, and provide post-employment support for youth (i.e., follow-up in the first 3–6 months).

Within the framework of digital transformation and reducing territorial inequality, it is proposed **to develop online training platforms accessible in rural areas**, with offline support and a tutoring network. The programs will be available through local schools, municipal networks and civil society organizations, and will cover basic computer literacy, online work, and e-commerce.

specialized digital skills programs can be designed for young people with disabilities, in cooperation with associations working on inclusion, and **assisted preparation for inclusion in a real business context can be offered**. The platform can be connected to databases of employers offering inclusive jobs, as well as to local social service centers.

3.4.2. Flexible working arrangements and promotion of work-life balance

In the face of increasing digitalization, demographic shifts, and changing dynamics in the global labor market, **flexible work arrangements** are evolving from an alternative to a structural element of the modern workplace. Especially among young people, who simultaneously strive for professional advancement, continuous learning, and a quality personal life, the need for flexibility is one of the key factors when choosing an employer or a professional path.

Flexible forms of employment, such as part-time work, remote work, project and freelance work, hybrid models or rotating schedules, are important tools for:

- increasing **the employability of young people**, especially those who are studying in parallel, caring for family members, or have health limitations;
- enabling **an adaptable transition from education to work**;
- **reducing migration** by retaining young talent with competitive and modern working conditions;
- promoting **mental health and general well-being**, through stress reduction, better time management and greater control over life rhythm.

For these arrangements to be integrated as **standard options in the economic system**, synchronized action by the public and private sectors is required, encompassing the following elements:

1. **Development of a legal framework and regulations** – The Ministry of Economy and Labor, in coordination with the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth and the social partners, should develop and formally adopt policies that recognize and regulate flexible work. This includes defining types of flexible work, minimum standards, protection of workers' rights, and encouraging voluntary acceptance by employers.



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- Promotion and support to employers** – Chambers of Commerce and Crafts, in cooperation with the Employment Agency and civil society organizations, should promote good practices and encourage companies to introduce flexible models. This could include technical assistance for the design of internal policies, management training and sharing of successful examples from domestic and European practice.
- Informing and supporting young workers** – it is necessary to establish communication channels (portals, platforms, campaigns) through which young people will be informed about their rights, opportunities and ways to seek flexible conditions from potential employers. Career centers in schools and universities, as well as public employment services, can play a key role in this direction.
- Monitoring the impact and adjusting policies** – establishing indicators and regularly monitoring the effects of the application of flexible arrangements (e.g. satisfaction rate, productivity, youth retention in employment), in order to adjust policies according to results and market needs.

Expected impact:

- Increased inclusiveness of the labor market**, by opening up opportunities for diverse groups of youth – including those who were previously marginalized or inactive;
- Improved work-life balance**, resulting in a higher level of personal well-being, fewer layoffs due to burnout, and greater mental stability;
- Greater productivity and creativity**, as a result of higher motivation, autonomy and a sense of confidence among young workers;
- Retaining young people in the country**, by creating modern and adapted working conditions according to global expectations.

4. Implementation and monitoring mechanisms

To ensure effective implementation of the proposed measures and models for promoting youth employability, it is necessary to establish an **integrated mechanism for coordination, implementation, monitoring and evaluation**, which will include:

4.1. National Coordinating Board for Youth Employment

It is proposed to establish a **high-level body with intersectoral composition**, which will have a mandate to oversee and guide the implementation of all recommended activities. The board will be composed of:

- Government representatives (Ministry of Economy and Labor, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth);
- directors of national agencies (Employment Agency of the Republic of Macedonia, Center for Vocational Education and Training, Fund for Innovation and Technological Development);
- representatives of social partners (Chamber of Commerce, Business Confederation of Macedonia, Chamber of Crafts of Skopje, trade unions);
- representatives of higher education and vocational institutions;



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- delegates from youth organizations and municipal youth councils.

Functions of the Board:

- Strategic planning of youth employability policies;
- Allocation and mobilization of national and international resources;
- Monitoring the implementation of action plans;
- Adopting corrective measures based on evaluation data;
- Coordination with the European Union and international organizations for compliance with European directives and funds.

4.2. Forum for Inter-sectoral Dialogue and Coordination

In the interest of transparency, inclusiveness and cooperation, it is proposed to establish **regular intersectoral forums** (once to twice a year), with the participation of all stakeholders:

- representatives from state and local government;
- enterprises and industrial associations;
- teaching staff, school principals, company mentors;
- youth and their organizations/councils;
- donor institutions and media.

These forums will serve as **a platform for consultations, policy review, sharing good practices**, identifying new challenges, networking and adapting strategies in line with economic and technological dynamics.

The forums will take place at **regional and national levels**, and the results will be documented in joint reports that will be submitted to the coordination board.

4.3. National impact measurement system and progress reports

To ensure systematic monitoring of results, it is proposed to establish **a National Youth Employability Monitoring Framework (YEMF)** that will monitor the following key indicators:

- Youth employment rate (total, by sectors, by regions);
- Number of young people involved in dual education, internship, mentoring and training programs;
- Number of registered young entrepreneurs and startups;
- NEET youth rate (persons not in education, employment or training);
- Number of young people employed through subsidized programs or flexible arrangements;
- Results from surveys on satisfaction, perception and career development among young people.

Progress reports should be prepared **annually**, with an obligation to publish them on the websites of the relevant institutions. They will be used for public policy review, budget allocation and argumentation of new projects to international donors.

4.4. Technical and administrative secretariat

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To ensure permanent capacity for logistics, support and data consolidation, a **Secretariat for Youth Employability should be established** as a technical body operating within one of the existing institutions (e.g. the Ministry of Economy and Labor or FITR). This secretariat will prepare materials for the meetings of the coordination board, manage the indicator platform, and provide administrative support for the forums and reports.