



## **OPINION PAPER ON INTERNSHIPS**

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## **Executive summary**

A successful and smooth transition from education to the labour market is one of the key concerns of the European Youth Forum (YFJ), especially in a period where young Europeans face difficulties in getting a decent and stable job. The YFJ believes that internships can play a key role in facilitating this transition, provided that the learning dimension of internships is ensured and that internships do not replace paid work.

The YFJ also welcomes the fact that European institutions, as well as national public entities, private companies and non-governmental organisations are providers of internship opportunities. However, very often, some of these entities are the first ones to disregard the main fundamental requirements when it comes to internships in terms of quality, remuneration, social benefits and counselling. Therefore the YFJ calls upon all European institutions, national public entities, private companies and NGOs to provide quality and framed internships and to apply a clear and coherent code of conduct, leading by example of what internships should be like.

In this sense, the YFJ has developed this Opinion Paper, outlining what are the requirements for an internship to be a quality one, both when part of a formal educational programme as well as when taking part outside formal education. The Paper also encompasses the YFJ demands towards other stakeholders on how to ensure quality internships for young Europeans.

## **1. Introduction**

Despite being the most educated generation ever, young people find it more and more difficult to get a decent and stable job. The fact is that, regardless of their level of qualifications, young Europeans face difficulties in transiting from education to the labour market.

A successful transition from education into employment has been one of the main foci of action and advocacy work in the European Youth Forum (YFJ). In this regard, the YFJ has adopted a Policy Paper on Youth Employment<sup>1</sup> where it has strongly addressed the need for fostering a smooth transition from education to employment and the role that internships can play in facilitating the access of young people to employment.

Indeed, the YFJ recognises that internships can be a valuable step in the transition from education to professional life and believes that internships must be, above all, a learning experience for young people that should facilitate their successful integration in the labour market.

However, in many countries, the learning dimension of internships has been decreasing, with many interns working on issues and tasks that do not contribute to the progress in their professional development. Therefore, the YFJ believes that it is high time to address this topic with a view of ensuring quality internships and preventing interns from being exploited.

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<sup>1</sup> See YFJ Policy Paper on Youth Employment (0813-07)

Moreover, ensuring that internships have an educational added value and avoiding that interns receive little or no pay, has been also stated as the official position of the European Commission<sup>2</sup>.

## **2. Quality Internships**

The YFJ considers an internship as a form of learning in a real work situation which can either be part of a formal education programme or be done voluntarily outside formal education, with the aim of acquiring competencies through executing 'real' work tasks whilst being financially compensated and having access to according social protection.

In this frame, two different types of internships can be identified:

Internship as part of a formal education programme: in this case, an internship is an educational activity intended to acquire competencies, knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to obtain the qualification at the end of the formal programme.

Internship which takes place outside formal education: in this case the intern voluntarily develops on-the-job experience with the aim of acquiring competencies according to his/her formal education qualifications and/or needs; however, s/he does not hold the same status and responsibilities as an employee.

The main aims of an internship must therefore be:

- to acquire practical experience and learn how to apply skills that have been previously acquired either in formal or non formal education schemes
- to orientate oneself professionally and also widen one's perspectives of different sectors
- to increase one's ability to be integrated in the labour market
- to contribute to the overall personal development of the individual as an active citizen, in the frame of lifelong learning

### **2.1. Quality Internship as part of formal education**

The YFJ believes that the educational objectives of an internship have to be set right from the outset, concurring with the educational programme. The tasks have to contribute to gaining the competencies set out in the objectives. While receiving a wage or salary cannot be the central aim of an internship, it is important to acknowledge that interns are providing their labour to the hosting organisation, thereby creating an added value. Thus s/he has the right to be remunerated adequately. This remuneration should be in addition to mandatory financial support in case costs are incurred or if s/he works beyond normal working hours.

Educational institutions, employers and interns have the co-responsibility to ensure that training – with a key educational objective in line with the curricula – is provided within companies and organisations where internships take place. Social Partners and organisations

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<sup>2</sup> See European Commission Communication « Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society » COM (2007) 498 final

which gather and represent interns should also be involved in setting the conditions under which internships take place.

Therefore, the YFJ requires that internships which are part of formal education encompass the following characteristics:

- existence of a written contract between the educational institution, intern and hosting organisation
- belonging to the formal educational programme with specified learning objectives shared with the student at the beginning of his/her internship
- length and tasks of the internship corresponding to the learning objectives
- guidance by a supervisor(s)/mentor(s) trained specifically for the role
- recognition of all competencies acquired through the internship
- reimbursement of costs incurred during the internship
- clear evaluation criteria of the internship period
- provision of an appropriate insurance
- right of students to receive a training regarding labour legislation, workers' rights and regulations concerning safety in the work place
- existence of a statute for interns, which encompasses the different minimum criteria of an internship

## **2.2. Quality Internship taking place outside formal education**

When the internship is a professional experience that takes place outside formal education, the YFJ acknowledges its positive role in facilitating young people's access to employment. The YFJ believes that such experiences should ensure that young people acquire the necessary competencies that meet their needs and previously acquired skills, whilst receiving appropriate compensation and gaining access to social protection and to other educational pathways in the Life Long Learning framework.

The YFJ further believes that such internships shall be limited in length and that employers should not be allowed to sign internship contracts that undermine labour legislation and/or the collective agreements, making sure that young people do not end up trapped in a succession of internships and unable to enter the labour market with a proper and adequate employment contract.

The YFJ also believes that Social Partners should play a key role in contributing to setting a fair and safe working environment for interns all over Europe and that the minimum conditions should be set through collective bargaining, when applicable. Employment protection authorities should have the duty to monitor the working conditions of interns.

Therefore, the YFJ requires that internships taking place outside formal education encompass the following characteristics:

- existence of a written contract
- limitation in the length of the internship, corresponding to the learning objectives
- decent remuneration in accordance to the tasks which are performed by the intern and to working hours

- reimbursement of costs incurred during the internship
- social security benefits according to local standards
- provision of appropriate insurance
- guidance by the supervisor(s)
- recognition of competencies acquired through the internship
- right to receive a training regarding labour legislation, workers' rights and regulations concerning safety in the work place
- existence of a statute for interns, which encompasses the different minimum criteria of an internship

### **3. What the European Youth Forum calls upon**

The YFJ calls upon more quality internships to be available and summons educational institutions, public authorities and enterprises to increase the internship opportunities for more young people. At the same time the YFJ is aware of the risk of a misuse of internships and therefore suggests measures to avoid exploitation and precarious working conditions of young people.

The YFJ underlines that internships cannot and must not replace paid work. The practice of interns being recruited instead of employees, in order to reduce employers' costs, without interns having access to any labour law protection and often without any or with very limited financial compensation, limits young people's chances to be autonomous<sup>3</sup>, to reconcile work and family life, and does not allow them to be fully integrated in society and make plans or investments in life.

The presence of a strong learning dimension is what makes internships different from any other on-the-job experience and this should be preserved and strengthened, avoiding any kind of exploitation of interns. All competencies acquired should be recognised, possibly within an enhanced Europass CV.

The YFJ requests that the European Institutions together with the European Social Partners develop and monitor a European Quality Framework that sets basic quality requirements for internships. In order to develop such a framework, and given the diversity in internships and their regulation at the European level, the YFJ calls for a strong monitoring of the implementation of internships at national level and for the elaboration of evidence and statistical analyses on internships amongst European countries.

The YFJ welcomes the fact that European Institutions, as well as national public entities, private companies and NGOs, are providers of internship opportunities. However, very often, some of these entities are the first ones to disregard the main fundamental requirements when it comes to internships in terms of quality, remuneration, social benefits and counselling. Therefore the YFJ calls upon all European Institutions, national public entities, private companies and NGOs to provide quality and framed internships and to apply a clear and coherent code of conduct, leading by example what internships should be like. As interns are creating an added value for the providers of the internships, the interns have the right to

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<sup>3</sup> See YFJ Policy Paper « Meeting young people's needs » A European Youth approach to Youth Policy (0590-06)

be remunerated accordingly. Furthermore, applicants and interns should be treated equally, regardless of gender, origin, religion or social background, sexual orientation, mental and physical disability.

The quality framework should also be an integral part of the European programmes that are offering internship possibilities, such as the Leonardo Da Vinci Programme and the projects undertaken under the European Structural Funds. The programmes include various internship opportunities and the YFJ believes that they can be instrumental in spreading good practices about quality internships throughout Europe.

Internships are increasingly also mobility experiences which can be an excellent learning opportunity to acquire new and needed competencies such as intercultural skills. Young people should be clearly informed about these possibilities and all actors should ensure that trans-national internship experiences also adhere to the quality standards.

NGOs can act as a model when it comes to the provision of quality working conditions for employees as well as interns. However, there has to be a coherent approach between what NGOs demand from other employers and how they act in practice when acting as employers themselves. NGOs should prevent young people from getting stuck in enduring cycles of internships and precarious job placements, as this is very often a poverty trap for the latter. The YFJ itself is a provider of internships and ensures that the interns do receive a sufficient salary and have access to adequate social protection.

The YFJ also encourages the creation, maintenance and improvement of advisory and information bodies and structures which can inform young people about their rights. Social Partners can play an active role in enhancing these bodies by devoting more attention to counselling and representing the interns, especially for the ones outside the educational channels. Moreover, the YFJ believes that it is crucial that an evaluation of the quality of internships is done both in the public and private sectors, and that it be carried out by an external entity. The YFJ strongly encourages the public denouncement of intern misuse and exploitation of young people in the work place.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the YFJ believes that internships can be a valuable step in the transition from education to professional life and strongly supports that quality internships must be made available to all young people, despite their social, educational and economic background. The YFJ underlines that internships must not replace paid work and that quality internships must be above all a learning experience for interns and not a way of exploiting young people.

The YFJ calls upon European countries to set and monitor quality frameworks for internships and urges European Institutions and European Social Partners to develop and monitor a European Quality Framework on Internships. In this regard, the YFJ is ready to cooperate with European Institutions and European Social Partners in developing and implementing such a European Framework.

The YFJ further calls upon public entities, private companies and NGOs, which are providers of internships, to provide quality internships and to apply a clear and coherent code of conduct.