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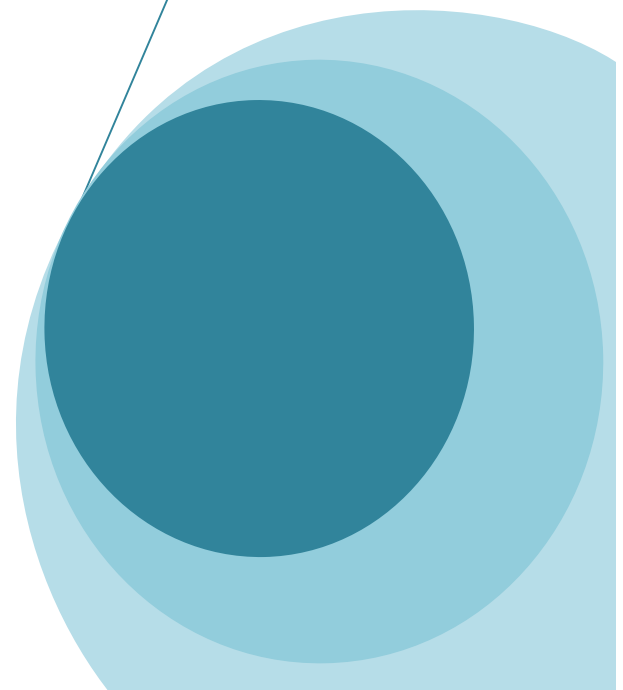
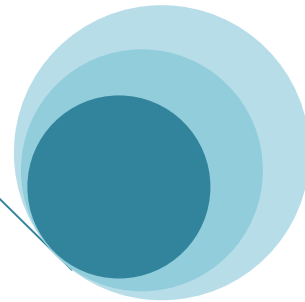
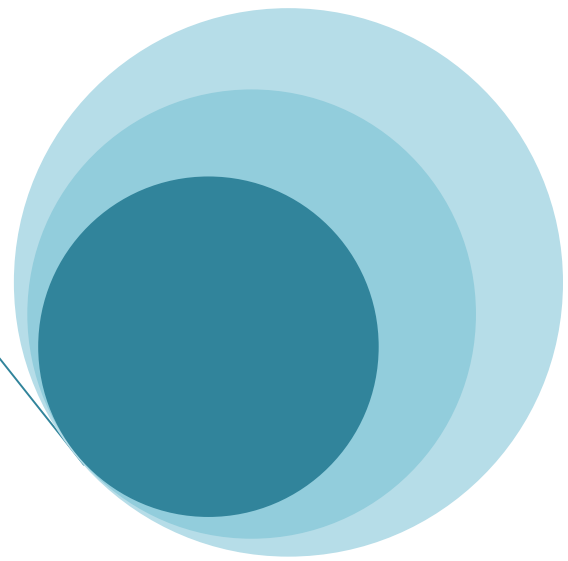
Towards Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

## **The Necessity of Improvement of the Internship Mechanism in the System of Higher Education**

Occasional Policy Brief

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**Yerevan  
2012**



## **The Necessity of Improvement of the Internship Mechanism in the System of Higher Education**

The paper focuses on the internship mechanism as an important resource for improvement of the system of higher education and establishment of effective connection between the universities and the labor market.

The Soviet system of internship had its own logic based on the state-planned economy principles, i.e. each graduate was obliged to spend certain period of time on working in a pre-determined position, depending on the profession. This meant that the student or the graduate had no alternative to the position offered by respective division of the university responsible for the organization of the internship program. The situation in Armenia is based on the Soviet heritage; however there are certain attempts by universities to adapt their internship programs to the new realities as well as plans to improve the internship mechanism in the 2010-2015 State Program on Development of Education.

The paper reveals that the connection between the Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) and the employers is very weak and lacks institutional approach. It is not regulated by the Armenian legislation and the institutional mechanisms that aim at providing this connection are not effective.

The paper introduces the results of a small-scale survey conducted in several educational institutions as well as potential internship host organizations. The survey confirms that there is a serious gap between the knowledge and skills received by students in their Universities and the requirements and expectations of potential employers. The survey also identifies that although the employers are generally positive in having interns in their organizations, they have very little knowledge on how to organize a productive internship. The paper proposes possible ways for improvement of the situation, particularly involvement of potential employers in the process of development of the educational standards and educational plans. This can be implemented through periodic surveys; research of the labor market prior to development of educational

standards and plans; consultations with employers; forecasting the development of labor market in mid and long term perspectives, etc.

The quality of internship offered to students is a serious issue. Many students are assigned to conduct technical work that does not provide them with the working experience they are expecting. Mainly there are no training facilities for interns at their job placements, no time is being allocated to them by key employees and thus they do not gain the necessary skills during their internship. There are few educational institutions that develop special projects in cooperation with employers for their students to be implemented during the internship period, which makes the whole process more productive both for interns and for employers. The paper proposes to include the internship projects as an obligatory component of the educational program.

The legal aspect of regulation of the internship mechanisms is another issue. The current legislation in Armenia does not regulate the student internship and there is no law on volunteering. This issue becomes a topic of discussion both in the National Assembly and among other major stakeholders. However, the solution of this problem is being postponed, since there is an assumption that the law on volunteering will create additional loopholes for employers to avoid paying taxes, particularly income tax. Employers, on the other hand, often complain that since the skills of interns are mostly of a low quality, even paying social tax for them is an unacceptable burden on businesses.

The paper suggests separating internship from other types of volunteer work through separate law that would regulate the relations between the intern, the employer and the University, as well as to define a special legal status for internship, which would include defining such issues as work experience awarded to them as a result of internship (*stage*), social tax and other payments that the employers should pay for having an intern, etc. Such an approach will eliminate opportunities for avoiding taxation and will create additional ground for cooperation between employers and Higher Educational Institutions. It will stimulate the institutionalization of internship which will lead to solution of major problems, making sure that the institution of internship contributes to higher education and job market, and moves Armenia to further development, including according to the Bologna standards.

EPF's Europe Program exists since January 2009. Its goal is contribution to productive implementation of the Eastern Partnership in Armenia. EPF disseminates information about the European Union and EU-Armenia relations, develops mechanisms for productive reform in the system of higher education, etc.

In 2012 EPF continued the development of policy papers on various aspects of the Eastern Partnership implementation in Armenia. The present summary introduces major outcomes of one of the papers.

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#### **Authorship and Disclaimer**

This analysis has been conducted by a lead expert on higher and non-formal education economic, Gayane Ghukasyan, at the request of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) as part of its Europe program, with the support of the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). The conclusions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of EPF and SIDA.