



Youth Employability Skills Network Project

Education Development Center, Inc.

Region	Global
Country	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
Organization	Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC)
Name	Youth Employability Skills (YES) Network Project
Category	Skills development
Start date	September 2010
End date	Ongoing (End date: September 2015)
Partners	USAID and national Government
UN involvement	Non-UN
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1. Background and description

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has always struggled with unemployment, which in 2005 reached an astonishing 50 per cent.² By 2013, the unemployment rate had decreased to 29 per cent,³ but despite this improvement, unemployment is still at a damaging and critical level. High unemployment rates are not only detrimental to social development but at the individual level can negatively affect a person's self-esteem and physical and psychological well-being.⁴ A major factor contributing to the high unemployment rate is the discrepancy between the skills acquired by youth through the education system and those required by employers and the labour market. Despite the introduction of new courses in the school curriculum on subjects such as 'Business and Entrepreneurship', according to a needs assessment conducted by the Youth Employability Skills (YES) Network, potential employers find that youth applying for jobs lack the skills and attitudes required by employers.⁵ These criticisms apply to all levels of education, including universities, but especially to secondary-level vocational and technical schools, which they say are outmoded and prepare students for obsolete jobs.

The major reason for this problem is the weak link between the skills supplied through the education system and those demanded by employers in the modern workforce. Vocational education and training (VET) secondary schools and other systems that prepare students and the unemployed for work lack a system of career counselling and workforce preparation.

¹ Programme Inquiry Form (16 September 2014); Interview (31 October 2014); Internal validation (12-19 December 2014); Implementer validation (20 January 2015); Final validation (October 2015). For the latest news about YES, visit the YES website: <http://www.yestnetwork.mk/>

² World Bank (2005).

³ Republic of Macedonia: State Statistical Office (2014). <http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2014/2.1.14.34.pdf>

⁴ McKee-Ryan, F.; Song, Z.; Wanberg, C. R.; Kinicki, A. J. (2005). YES Network is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents expressed in this case study are the responsibility of Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

⁵ Interview with Gjorgje Kusevski, Chief of Party on 31 October 2014.



The Employment Service Agency (ESA) offices are designated to serve as a labour exchange, but they lack resources and skills to offer relevant job-related services to unemployed youth. Little or no career counselling takes place, and there is no system of assessment of the aptitude, interests and affinities of job seekers.

Both schools and ESA offices were not able to provide services and respond flexibly to changing labour market needs and to improve the 'supply' of future workers.

Against this backdrop, the United States-based Education Development Center (EDC), with assistance and funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), initiated the YES Network in 2010. EDC also partners with municipal governments as it believes this partnership to be crucial in tackling youth unemployment. The programme is a five-year project which aims to enhance the employability and skills of Macedonian youth and to strengthen the vital connection between labour market needs and the skills developed through the educational system.

To overcome this issue, the project interventions focused mainly on:

- Building the capacity of ESA local branch offices and secondary schools to deliver training to improve skills and work readiness and provide work-based learning opportunities and career counselling services to youth;
- Supporting dialogue between the public and private sectors under the leadership of municipal governments, through local economic and social councils, which are advisory bodies to municipal councils.

Organization profile ⁶

EDC works on designing, implementing and evaluating programmes that aid in enhancing education, health and economic opportunities around the world. EDC “strive(s) for a world where all people are empowered to live healthy, productive lives”.⁴



⁶ EDC www.edc.org.



2. Goal and objectives

2.1. Goal

The primary goal of the YES programme is to enhance the employability skills of Macedonian youth.

2.2. Objectives ⁷

- To facilitate public-private dialogue that will enhance the demand-supply labour exchange at the local level;
- To develop venues for meeting immediate skills/training needs of the labour market and for career development opportunities;
- To strengthen the job services capacity of ESA and its ability to match youth with jobs in the private sector, to ensure that trained youth are provided with better services, i.e., training in work readiness skills, access to structured work-based learning opportunities and up-to-date information on job openings and career development opportunities;
- To provide continuing professional development opportunities for teachers in secondary schools;
- To create innovative mechanisms to make VET schools and centres more responsive and relevant;
- To integrate productive connections with current and planned workforce-related activities of USAID and other donors;
- To strengthen the capacities of NGOs and disabled persons organizations to develop the employability skills of youth;
- To provide career exploration and career counselling services for youth and furnish them with resources related to preparedness for work and information on the current status and demands of the local labour market.

3. Target group

3.1. Age group

The YES Network project targets young people aged 15-27 years who are students in their final year of secondary school, VET school and gymnasium; unemployed registrants with the ESA; and out-of-school, unregistered and unemployed.

Although there are no exclusion criteria for eligibility to participate in the programme,

due to funding reasons, the programme is geographically limited to seven municipalities in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

3.2. Gender considerations

The participants are a blend of both genders and different nationalities, with no preference or priority given on the basis of either gender or nationality.

3.3. Ethnic/disability considerations



In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, YES has recently expanded the programme to include youth with disabilities. This was made possible due to a grant awarded through a competitive process organized by USAID worldwide. The YES Network project will now be able to help youth with disabilities to attain a job.

YES has developed tailor-made curricula for improving the employability skills of Macedonian students and youth. Two of these curricula – work readiness skills and work-based learning – have already been upgraded with guidelines on working with disabled youth for secondary school teachers and ESA staff, youth-serving non-profit organizations and disabled people's organizations. The guidelines are specific to the activities of the above-mentioned YES programmes and are designed specifically for students and youth with physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities. YES is currently upgrading its career counselling programme and manual with the same type of guidelines and tips for teachers and facilitators.

The YES Network project equipped 37 secondary schools and seven ESA centres with assistive technology devices and software (big-button keyboard, joystick, trackball and switch, as well as NVDA screen reader for youth with visual impairments). Students and youth with various disabilities are now able to enjoy the benefits of assistive technology in the training venues. The project will install access ramps and make some of these schools fully accessible to persons with physical disabilities.

It is expected that about 15 per cent of all youth participating in YES workshops will have a disability.

Furthermore, youth with disabilities are participating in local economic and social councils, i.e., venues for public-private dialogue around youth employability.

3.4. Targeting the most marginalized/ most at risk

The YES programme targets unemployed and marginalized youth as well as vulnerable populations. In addition to the national consequences, unemployment can have a significantly negative impact on a person's self-esteem and physical and psychological health.³ These damaging effects can increase people's vulnerability.

3.5. Human rights programming

The YES programme aims to empower youth, irrespective of ethnic background or any disability. The programme is in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in that it builds the capacity of the educational and employment support systems to provide employment services to youth with disabilities. YES also acts in accordance with the general principles of the Convention on non-discrimination, full and effective participation, inclusion in society, equality of opportunity and accessibility for persons with disabilities.

3.6. Youth involvement

Youth participated in focus group discussions to define the objectives of the programme. Youth are also actively involved in the implementation of some of the programme's activities. For example, representatives of youth NGOs were responsible for delivering the work readiness skills training to unemployed youth. Students from VET schools who volunteer in the career centres are responsible for promoting the centres' services to students in the schools and helping fellow students to prepare their curriculum vitae (c.v.).





4. Strategy and Implementation

4.1. Strategies / theoretical approaches / methodologies

YES implementers conducted a needs assessment with business representatives and youth to understand the situation and challenges of youth employment.

YES works directly with secondary and vocational school teachers, staff from local ESA centres and NGOs that work with unemployed youth. YES conducts training-of-trainers workshops for staff and teachers from these agencies to equip them to deliver the work readiness skills and work-based learning programmes.

4.2. Activities

In order to achieve the project objectives the following activities have been implemented:

- The work readiness skills programme is implemented in partnership with the VET schools and ESA centres. The trained teachers and facilitators from both ESA and VET help students and unemployed youth to develop their 'soft' skills (communication skills, teamwork, workplace behaviour, job searching etc.). A programme for elective classes has been approved by the VET centre and is implemented with third-year VET students.
- The work-based learning programme structures the students' practical training and also suggests a variety of forms and techniques that students can apply in their work-based learning. A programme for elective classes that elaborates these techniques has been approved by a VET Centre and is implemented with fourth-year VET students. Alternatively, certain

techniques are integrated in existing technical subjects and classes.

- The career counselling programme provides the teachers and ESA facilitators with the basic competences necessary to offer career counselling to students and unemployed youth. It also helps them to initiate and organize services in the school career centres and job clubs in ESA centres. An elective programme for career planning classes has been approved by a VET centre and is implemented with second-year VET students. Certain contents of the programme can also be integrated in regular teaching and learning subjects.
- Establishment of career centres and job clubs. The YES Network invested in the establishment of 48 career centres in secondary schools and seven job clubs in ESA centres. The career centres and job clubs were equipped with furniture, IT equipment and relevant reading materials.
- The 'mentor in companies' programme is for representatives of the business sector, who are trained to cooperate more effectively with schools and work with students during their work-based learning experiences. These trainings are delivered by VET Centre advisors, business consultants for safety at the work place and YES Network staff.
- Local economic and social councils. The YES Network was established to initiate and maintain the public-private dialogue on youth employment and the labour market, and to serve as a platform to better match the skills required by the labour market with those developed in schools. Through the formation and



operation of local economic and social councils, the project contributes to the development of knowledge, skills and opportunities within the local community to improve the social dialogue. To date, local economic and social councils have been established in all seven partner municipalities.

The following is a summary of some of the activities conducted in 2013: ⁸

- Partner NGOs implemented five workshops on work readiness skills in which 97 unemployed, unregistered out-of-school youth participated.
- The ESA established a plan for these workshops that will be implemented every six months.
- The YES Network renovated and fully re-equipped three job centres in the ESA centres in three different areas of the country.
- Additional ESA staff was trained in the work readiness skills programme.
- 16 ESA staff representatives were trained in facilitation skills.
- A workshop on 'online career portfolio' was developed and 88 registered unemployed youth attended the workshop and received the training.
- The ESA developed the internship handbook and respective workshops.
- ESA centres organized 35 workshop cycles which trained 585 unemployed registrants in the work readiness skills curriculum.
- Career centres were opened in secondary schools in three areas of the country.
- 67 VET teachers and school principals participated in work-based learning workshops.

- 441 VET students participated in the work-based learning programme.

4.3. Innovativeness

YES works to equip youth with tools and skills that meet employers' standards and expectations. YES does not focus on one activity or aspect of work training, but rather provides the youth with a package to prepare them to face the realities of the workforce.

YES has included persons with disabilities in the programme, which is crucial since unemployment is especially high among disabled youth and few agencies cater to their specific needs.

4.4. Cost and funding

The YES programme has received \$7 million from USAID for the five years required for its implementation. The funding from USAID is a major factor in the programme's success. Without this funding, the YES programme would not have been able to sustain itself throughout the five-year implementation period, especially given the programme's large scale which involved ESA, NGOs and secondary schools in seven different municipalities.

Most of the funding goes to on-the-ground activities, supporting training activities and grants to local partners.

4.5. Sustainability

The funds from USAID helped substantially to sustain the programme for the past four years and will continue to do so until the end of its final year. The fact that the YES programme has been institutionalized in the curriculum of the vocational schools considerably helped the programme's sustainability as this secures the venue, staff and other crucial logistics required for implementation.





Since the very beginning of the project's activities with schools, the YES programme has been working closely with national educational institutions to include YES training programmes in the regular school curriculum and to train more teachers per school to ensure that the schools have the capacity to meet the needs of more student groups interested in the programmes.

The work readiness skills programme is nationally approved and adopted by the VET centres as an elective course through which the modules are delivered to third-year vocational school students. Likewise, an adapted work-based learning programme has been approved and adopted at the national level as an elective course for fourth-year students. A career counseling/planning programme aimed at VET school students in their second year followed the same pattern.

The YES Network project has already achieved sustainable results in the introduction of new training courses at ESA centres. Originally, selected staff members from seven ESA offices were trained to deliver the work readiness skills and work-based learning to unemployed youth. The trainings have been delivered continuously as part of regular ESA job club activities. In partnership with the ESA centres, YES continues to support internship activities for unemployed youth and to encourage them to use the services offered by the job clubs.

This institutionalization of the YES programme further cements its sustainability.

4.6. Replicability

The programme has not been replicated beyond the seven target municipalities.

The Education Development Centre produces an annual monitoring and evaluation report which details the successes and lessons learned from each year. The monitoring and evaluation are conducted through quantitative (questionnaires and observation check lists) and qualitative (focus groups and interviews) data collection methods.

5. Evaluation of effectiveness

- By establishing a local economic and social council in six municipalities, the programme was able to facilitate public-private dialogue to improve the supply and demand of labour exchange;
- The local ESA was able to improve to improve its services due to the YES programme's development and implementation of the work readiness skills, work-based learning and career counselling training programmes;
- ESA was able to deliver 81 work readiness skills workshops to 1,400 unemployed youth, of whom 201 youth were able to find employment and are currently employed;
- 373 secondary school teachers were trained in and delivered the work readiness skills curriculum to their students;
- 4,476 students participated in the programme; 83 per cent of the youth who received the training have reported that they have significantly improved their employability skills;
- 1,444 students have completed the work-based learning training programme and 565 students have completed the career planning programme;
- 38 career centres and seven job clubs





were established.

- The work readiness skills and work-based learning programmes have been adopted and integrated in the VET centres as elective courses and as part of the national curriculum for vocational schools.

6. Strengths and opportunities

The integration of the program into VET and secondary schools is the main strength in that it furthers both the sustainability and reach of the programme.

The creation of a pool of trained teachers in each of the partner schools ensures that capacities have been built in the schools for delivering the contents of the programmes after the project's closure. As all programmes have been adopted as elective subjects at a national level, there is a basis for further expansion of these programmes beyond the municipalities involved in the YES Network. The integration of the contents of the YES training programmes into existing subjects also contributes to extending the programme's reach.

7. Challenges

Three major challenges were encountered in the implementation of the YES programme:

- Since the programme included unemployed youth who were not registered with the state ESA, reaching them proved to be difficult. YES partnered with local NGOs serving youth, training representatives from the NGOs to deliver the YES training programmes. YES also provided grants to at least one NGO in each partner municipality to deliver work

readiness skills workshops to unemployed youth who are not registered with ESA. The YES Network constantly encourages them to register with ESA so they can use all the services that ESA centres provide to unemployed youth;

- Schools did not always have enough rooms to conduct the programme activities. (Because of the large number of students, some schools lacked space even for regular school activities.) As an alternative, the career centres equipped by YES were used as venues for delivering the YES programmes, which was a partial solution to the problem.
- Teachers sometimes felt overloaded by their responsibilities. This issue was addressed by including more teachers from partner schools in YES activities and integrating the YES programme as part of school curricula.

8. Next steps and the way forward

Considering the gradual involvement of municipalities and the consecutive development of the programmes, in the remaining year of the project the YES Network will focus on completing the training cycles so that all involved partners receive the necessary capacity-building. Simultaneously, YES Network will work on strengthening the structure necessary for sustaining these programmes in close cooperation with the partner institutions.

It will cooperate with VET centres on creating a pool of teachers who will be able to disseminate work readiness skills training to other teachers in their schools and also in schools that were not involved in the YES Network, because this programme gives immediate results in strengthening students'

skills and increasing their self-confidence.

Because the cooperation with the businesses regarding students' work-based learning experiences proved to be a significant part of the process of acquiring experience at the work place, YES Network will cooperate closely with the business associations and chambers of commerce to intensify training of mentors in participating companies.

The career counselling programme proved to be a necessity in schools. Students expressed their need to receive this type of orientation and guidance in making career decisions. However, it was unanimously concluded that the career counselling should begin at an earlier age. The Ministry of Education supports the idea of strengthening career counselling prior to secondary school enrolment. The YES Network can support this initiative by developing necessary materials and strengthening teachers' capacities for providing career counselling at earlier stages. Providing opportunities for public-private dialogue through the local economic and social councils is one of the main priorities of the project. Although the dialogue has begun, it is in an early phase and needs to be supported in order to reach a productive level.

9. Lessons learned and recommendations

After four years of implementation, a number of recommendations could be useful to consider if the YES programme is to be implemented again.

- Including the business sector in defining needed work skills and training facilitates and enhances the relevance of the programme.
- Working with state institutions and

involving youth from the beginning and in all stages of the programme proved to be an asset to the programme's success and effectiveness.

- It is important to recruit more teachers, staff and volunteers in the training of trainers programme to avoid overloading only a few.

10. Components to consider for scale-up in MENA

- Training materials and handbooks developed in one of the programme
- The strategy for institutionalization of the YES programme in VET schools
- The strategy for inclusion of disabled youth
- The company mentoring programme
- Improved Employment Service Agency for unemployed youth
- The strategy for the creation of local economic and social councils





11. Resources

- Training of trainers modules;
- Work readiness skills modules;
- Work-based learning modules;
- Elective courses material
- Company mentoring modules;
- Disabled-specific modules;
- EQUIP 3 Lessons Learned.

Photo credits: EDC.

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Interview with Gjorgje Kusevski, Chief of Party on 31 October 2014

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