



## Youth Prospects in Serbia Policy Notes

July 16, 2008

The Pontis Foundation together with its partners organised a Roundtable at the premises of the University of Nis on the 11<sup>th</sup> June, entitled "**Youth prospects**".

The **objective** was to create an open forum for young people (university students) to take a more active role in solving their poor employment prospects, thereby taking on some leadership in this sense. The event was designed to achieve this goal by encouraging direct engagement of young people with other relevant stakeholders such as university representatives and those from local businesses from the Nis region, as well as providing them with examples of good practice from Slovakia.

### **Background**

It is estimated that Serbia currently has 300 000 unemployed young people. The country suffers from a chronic brain drain. According to information from April 2008, 378 000 young people are currently seeking employment for the first time. Of course, there are many reasons for this. Firstly, mechanisms for the implementation of vocational education are missing; secondly, legislation framework is missing; and finally, cooperation between companies and Universities is very poor. The impact of this can also be viewed through the lack of interest showed from lecturers to educate students in practical internships, as well as the slow implementation of the Bologna process. Nis is a town where unemployment in general is estimated to 30 %. According to research<sup>1</sup>, 66% of young people from Nis would like to work alongside their studies, 55% of Nis young see the main problem in finding employment as involving corruption, whilst 72% believe that practical working experience gained during their studies would help them to find employment after graduation.

Pontis together with its respected friends and partners ***Citizens pact for SEE Europe, RC Nis, Protecta, OGI, LDA*** sent an invitation to the Roundtable to all relevant stakeholders in the Nis region. 30 participants attended the Roundtable, in addition to those journalists present. The majority of those attending were from youth and student organisations, whilst three people came from the business sector. Unfortunately nobody from the University staff could attend. The rest of the numbers were made up from different NGOs and media outlets.

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<sup>1</sup> Research on cross-border cooperation [www.young2young.com](http://www.young2young.com)

As a concrete result of the Roundtable, the Pontis Foundation together with its respected partners decided to outline a number of recommendations for University staff, as stated in the following bullets:

- **Youth activism** is crucial and should be reflected in a bottom-up approach with the creation of student organisations. It is of vital interest to students to join organisations through which they are able to formulate and advocate their interests and needs. University students in Serbia should take a leading role if their respective faculties / universities are not able to institutionalise a constructive dialogue. Since it is not likely to expect that the initiative will be taken on by educational institutions, it lies on students / youth to establish their own associational organisations. Student NGOs can also act as a mediator between companies and universities which could further foster their chances to find employment after graduation. Such a dialogue (students – university – business) would bring benefit to all interested parties and for university students, this would allow them to participate in European exchange study programmes.
- **An office for international cooperation** has to be established at any of the Serbian universities. With Serbia being eligible for the Erasmus Mundus Programme, it makes sense to utilise this opportunity. Such an office has to be at the full disposal of students and gather and *proactively* provide information on studying opportunities abroad (it can be done additionally by monitoring specific web portals: *EURES, GUIDENET, ERUDES, PLOTEUS and FIT for EUROPE*). It should be financially viable, while making use of extensive know-how on office practices which can be shared with countries that recently underwent such a process (like Slovakia).
- **Universities should attract the business sector** and engage them in an institutionalised and long-term cooperation. A good example already exists in Nis, where the Electronic Faculty fosters the Bologna process and within this framework successfully cooperates with companies in the region. Other faculties / universities should learn from this example and should more intensively develop the institutional capacity of different offices which support young students in their practical studies and internships (such as within a *career office*, etc.). Universities / faculties should act proactively to raise the quality of education followed by international standards certifications. Universities and companies should cooperate closely and inform each about the strategies of both, with the common aim to facilitate better employment opportunities for the young after their graduation. *All business actors have to be approached* by universities or students associations. This means not only big companies, but also small and medium sized companies should be involved.
- **Business should provide internships**, which have been identified by NGOs and companies as one of the possible instruments to engage with university students and increase their expertise during their studies. However the main problem for young people in Serbia who find employment is inappropriate working ethics, including limited practical knowledge. One of the ways how to tackle this problem is to provide them with the possibility to gain this practical experience and show them how the corporate environment works. Again, fostered institutional capacity is vital, but in the end this is in the fundamental interest of both stakeholders involved: businesses and universities.

- ***Students with disabilities*** have to be taken into serious consideration, keeping in mind that they are given very little attention both from universities and business. There is also an insufficient legislative framework on the national level in this regard, for example the law does mention penalties for those corporations that discriminate against people with disabilities. Firstly, *Serbia has to adopt an antidiscrimination law*, while students with disabilities should assemble into a joint organisation.

We believe that these recommendations will serve as an inspiration and motivation for action. Further research should be undertaken on young people from the Nis region and the structural problems they face within employment.