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## Improvement of employability in agricultural companies through mentorship-based practical training

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### Introduction

Practical training is essential for preparing agricultural students to meet the demands of a dynamic labor market. To address this, the Faculty of Agriculture at Goce Delcev University, Shtip, in collaboration with Palladium International LLC Skopje (IME initiative) and E4E@mk, implemented a mentorship-based student practical training program.

The program was designed to strengthen the link between academia and industry by integrating students into real working environments within agricultural companies.

This collaboration provided students with valuable hands-on learning opportunities, direct exposure to employers, and in some cases, full-time employment after the internship.

### Results

- ❖ Signed contracts with 10 companies to conduct mentorship-based practical training;
- ❖ 8 mentors from Goce Delcev University and 8 mentors from agribusiness companies were trained for mentoring student;
- ❖ 14 mentoring programs and 14 student internship job descriptions were developed;
- ❖ The mentorship practical program was conducted for 14 students in 5 companies according to the developed mentoring programs;
- ❖ Two events 'MEET YOUR POTENTIAL EMPLOYER' were organized with a purpose companies to meet students and students to meet their potential employers. During the events, different stakeholders took the floor to emphasize the importance of such collaboration between academia and agribusiness and
- ❖ One event for dissemination and promotion of mentorship-based practical training was organized.



Photos from different activities during the implementation and promotion of mentorship-based practical training program

### Discussion

#### Positive experiences from in mentorship-based practical training:

- We succeeded in bringing together the academia, agricultural sector and representatives from relevant ministries together during several meetings.
- The joint initiative between academia and agribusiness is beneficial for the students as they acquire a higher quality of practical teaching, while the companies properly train staff who will be ready for labor market.
- The events and training for the mentors were attended at a satisfactory level which shows the necessity for such activities.
- The events remarkably increased students' interest for practical learning in agro-business companies.

#### Challenges and open questions in mentorship-based practical training:

- **Certification:** Responsibility for issuing certificates for trained mentors remains unclear.
- **Program management:** Clear roles are needed within faculties for preparing programs and coordinating students with employers.
- **Seasonality:** Agricultural production is seasonal, making the winter semester less suitable for training. Need for continuous mentor training in companies is required for year-round implementation.
- **Low company interest:** Despite efforts, company engagement remains limited. Incentives and support mechanisms are needed to increase participation.
- **Farms owned by student family:** Students with family farms could complete training on their own holdings, documented through activity diaries, faculty visits, and peer exchanges.
- **Legal framework:** The current Law on Higher Education in Republic of North Macedonia does not clearly regulate student practical training, except for certain professions. Institutions still rely on outdated rulebooks.

### Conclusions

- The mentorship-based practical training program proved valuable for bridging the gap between academic learning and agribusiness needs, providing students with real work experience and employment opportunities.
- Challenges remain, including unclear certification responsibilities, limited company engagement, seasonal constraints, and gaps in the legal framework.
- Strengthening policy support, expanding mentor training, and creating incentives for companies are essential to ensure the sustainability and wider impact of such programs in agricultural higher education.

#### Recommendations for future activities:

- There is a need for systematic implementation of mentorship practical programs during the academic year as mandatory.
- Mandatory mentorship practical program shall be included in the Law on Higher Education, together with Rulebook on the method and conditions for organizing mentorship practical programs for students.
- Organization of trainings for mentors from faculties and companies for future implementation of mentorship practical programs.
- Events to strengthen the cooperation between higher education institutions and the agro-business community.

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