

Make it work!

Integrating virtual mobility in
international work placements



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Introduction

International work placements or internships, as they are generally known, are gaining more and more importance in the context of internationalization of higher education and globalization of our (professional) world.

This publication compiles the results of the EU-VIP project (Enterprise University – Virtual Placements). This European project, funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Life Long Learning programme, looked closely at the possibilities virtual mobility or ICT-supported interaction to realize international collaboration offers to support and enable international work placements. The project ran from October 2009 until September 2011.

This manual wishes to address the three stakeholders that are involved in an international work placement: the higher education institution, the student and the receiving company or organization. The main focus is on 'How To' integrate virtual mobility activities in international internships.

In a first chapter we take some time to explicate the context of this manual (why is it important to consider the possibilities of virtual mobility for international internships) and the definitions used throughout the project and, subsequently, in this compilation. The second chapter looks at the general themes of virtual mobility and international internships from the three different stakeholder perspectives, aiming to identify advantages and challenges for all actors involved. Next we introduce the general framework for organizing virtual(ly supported) work placements (chapter 3) and the identified conditions for success (chapter 4). Both framework and conditions for success are illustrated through real examples and witness statements, based on the experiences in the EU-VIP project. The project itself and the methodology followed are described more in detail in the fifth and last chapter.

For the hurried reader, the contents of this manual are also available as a short and concise quick guide in English, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, German, Italian and Polish. You can download this quick guide and consult other material regarding the integration of virtual mobility in international work placements and also regarding the EU-VIP project via www.euvip.eu.

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01

Context and definitions



We live in a globalized world. Due to an increased economic connectivity and integration we experience a constant mobility of people, goods, capital and ideas in the world around us. It is of paramount importance that the current and future work force possesses the right skills to deal with the threats and opportunities of this global economy.

In answer to the challenges brought about by **globalization, internationalization** has become one of the key issues in present day European higher education. Internationalization consists of a conscious integration of an international dimension into research and teaching, with as a main goal the development of intercultural competencies: to enable students to tolerate diversity and to embrace differences without feeling threatened in their own cultural identity.¹ The Europe 2020 strategy, launched by the European commission in 2010, emphasizes the need for **learning mobility**, i.e. transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new skills.²

One way to realize learning mobility is physical student mobility. In 2009 the Ministers in charge of higher education in the countries participating in the Bologna process adopted the Leuven Communiqué, which stipulates that “in 2020 at least 20% of those graduating in the European higher education area should have had a study or training period abroad”.³ Even if this ambitious goal will be achieved, this will still mean that the vast majority of students in Europe will not undertake a physical cross-border study or training. For a large number of students it is even not possible to go abroad for social, financial or other reasons. Next to this, the growing success of Erasmus⁴ and other exchange programmes has revealed a need for students to get more and better guidance and support before, during and after their international experiences.

A possible alternative and addition to physical mobility, in view of realizing the needed learning mobility, is **virtual mobility**. Virtual mobility is a relatively new concept with a broad scope. In the framework of this publication we would like to define it as “a set of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) supported activities that realize or facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching and/or learning”.⁵

- The broad term ‘activities’ was chosen over ‘a form of learning’, as virtual mobility can refer to learning, teaching and research. Activities can also refer to organizational, logistical or administrative issues related to international education.
- Virtual mobility can be fully or partly supported by ICT. In the first case the environment where all activities take place is entirely at a distance and digital, while in the latter case ICT is used to facilitate a physical activity, such as a student exchange or a visiting foreign expert. Some refer to this as blended mobility, whereby aspects of virtual and physical mobility are being combined in order to maximize the advantages of both. Information and communication technologies that are used in the framework for virtual mobility are particularly, but not exclusively, focused on communication or collaboration. These technologies can support both synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Popular tools are video and web conferencing, chat, discussion forums, weblogs, wiki’s, e-portfolios, sharing tools and social networking tools. Many of these are integrated in a virtual learning environment supported by the university.
- Virtual mobility is about international, collaborative experiences, i.e. the accumulation of knowledge of, skills in or observation of intercultural differences and similarities gained through active participation in an ICT supported, international event. ‘Collaboration’ is added to emphasize that in order to stimulate the development of intercultural competences and/or sensitivity at a distance, this form of interaction is favourable.

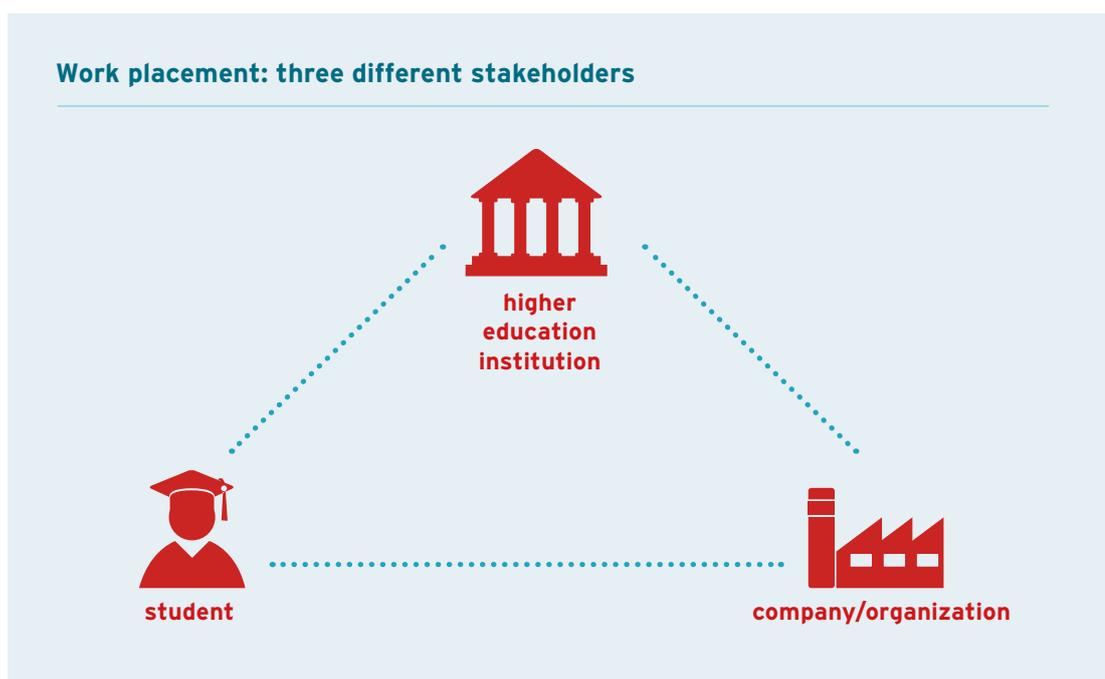
We introduce virtual mobility here as an additional way of teaching and/or learning in an international context, not as a substitution for physical mobility. Both types of learning mobility have their own merits and disadvantages that should be taken into account.

Virtual mobility can be implemented in higher education at different levels: the level of the assignment, the course, the curriculum, etc. In this publication we will focus on the enhancement of **international work placements** through the implementation of virtual mobility.

Work placements or internships are an important way of exposing students to complex work problems that require analytical, technical and soft skills. They play an essential role in helping graduates obtain the competencies and skills that are required in the current professional world. The Europe 2020 strategy also considers stronger links between universities and businesses to be essential for Europe to be able to evolve into a true knowledge-based economy.⁶ Internships are considered a central mechanism in supporting the link between these two players. In the contexts of internationalization and globalization, an international dimension to gaining this practical work experience is becoming more and more important.

Work placements do exist in many different shapes and sizes. In the context of this publication we focus on those placements that are offered and undertaken within the framework of formal tertiary education, as part of a curriculum. A work placement therefore sets itself apart from a student job through the inclusion of an intentional learning agenda in the experience and the assessment of these predefined learning goals at the end of the experience.⁷ We also distinguish between a student (business) project and an actual work placement. In the latter the student actually becomes part of the real professional world, even if only for a limited period in time.

Traditional international work placements, where the learner travels to the company abroad, require a high degree of flexibility and there are regularly financial, geographical, social and other barriers to such physical mobility. For those physical placements abroad that do happen, there are also a number of difficulties to overcome, e.g. students receive insufficient and discontinuous feedback from their home institution, communication between the company and the higher education institution is often lacking, feedback about a placement at a company to the higher education institution and vice-versa is barely formalised, etc.⁸





This publication looks at **the possibilities virtual mobility can offer to support or even enable international work placements**. Any work placement, according to our definition, involves three different stakeholders: the student , the higher education institution  and the receiving company or organization . During a work placement these three stakeholders ideally interact with each other on a regular basis, although the main line of interaction will of course be between the student and the company/organization. Virtual mobility can be implemented to facilitate this interaction at a distance. This can happen on the three different lines of interaction between student, higher education institution and company/organization. The implementation of ICT to support interaction can also differ from very limited (when most of the interaction between the two stakeholders takes place face-to-face) to very far-reaching (when all of the interaction between the two stakeholders happens at a distance). The figure above illustrates the different lines of interaction visually.

In what we will further refer to as a ‘virtual’ work placement, the interaction between student  and company/organization  takes place (almost) completely at a distance, supported with technology. In an international setting both parties are in this case (mostly) located in a different country. But, as the figure above illustrates, an international work placement or internship is preferably always a blend of virtual and physical interaction between the different stakeholders who ideally are all involved in the learning experience.

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- 1 Matthias Otten, “Intercultural Learning and Diversity in Higher Education”, *Journal of Studies in International Education* (Special Issue Internationalisation at Home) 7, no. 1 (2003):13.
 - 2 European Commission, “Europe 2020 A European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth.” Communication of the European Commission (Brussels, European Commission, 2010). http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/president/news/documents/pdf/20100303_1_en.pdf
 - 3 Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, “The Bologna Process 2020. The European Higher Education Area in the new decade.” Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education (Leuven & Louvain-la-Neuve, 2009). http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve_Communique_April_2009.pdf
 - 4 The Erasmus Programme (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is a European Union student exchange programme established in 1987. It forms a major part of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme 2007–2013, and is the operational framework for the European Commission’s initiatives in higher education.
 - 5 Johannes De Gruyter, Mart Achten, Ilse Op de Beeck, and Wim Van Petegem. “Virtual Mobility: Definition and Types.” In *Home & Away Forum. Conference Proceedings*, eds. Mart Achten, Ilse Op de Beeck and Wim Van Petegem (Heverlee, Belgium: EuroPACE ivzw, 2010), 19.
 - 6 European Commission, “Europe 2020 A European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth.” Communication of the European Commission (Brussels, European Commission, 2010). http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/president/news/documents/pdf/20100303_1_en.pdf
 - 7 Sarah Cornelius, D. Medyckyj-Scott, D. Forrest, A. Williams, and W. Mackaness. “The Virtual Placement: An Alternative to the Traditional Work Placement in the Geographical Sciences?” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 32, no. 2 (2008): 287-302.
 - 8 Wim van Petegem and Johannes de Gruyter. “Virtual Internships.” In *European networking and learning for the future. The EuroPACE approach*, eds. Annemie Boonen and Wim Van Petegem (Heverlee, Belgium: EuroPACE, 2006), 160-169.

02

Stakeholder perspectives



A work placement always involves three different stakeholders: the student, the higher education institution and the company or organization which temporarily employs the student. Here we will take a look at what international placements and the integration of virtual mobility in these types of placements can mean for the three stakeholder groups.

The student

In view of the development of a globally interconnected economy, international work placements are gaining a lot of importance. Today's students are the future work force and they will be expected to function professionally in an environment that is becoming more and more international with ever stronger requirements for foreign language proficiency. Undertaking an international work placement can be an excellent opportunity for current students to work on the intercultural and linguistic competences they will need in their future professional careers as well as an opportunity to add a factor of differentiation to their profile. Recent surveys,⁹⁻¹⁰ among companies also indicate that a cross-border professional experience is a more convincing element in a CV than merely an international study experience.

The integration of virtual mobility substantially increases the possibilities for flexible set-ups of international placements. It allows for a better combination of study at home and work abroad, for instance in a blended model where the student combines work related stays abroad with study moments at home while continuing the placement at a distance. Fully virtual placements can even give access to international professional experiences for students who are unable to travel abroad, for instance adult learners who combine their study with a job or students with a physical disability. When virtual mobility activities are introduced during an international placement to get feedback from an academic mentor at home or to interact with peers in a similar situation, this can increase the quality of the learning experience. The integration of virtual mobility activities will enable students not only to develop professional and intercultural skills during the placement: the technology and virtual communication skills and the skills needed for distributed working of the students are also likely to increase.

Of course the virtual aspect also poses challenges for the students involved, especially when we look at the fully virtual variant of an international work placement. Important aspects of an (international) work placement are issues like organizational socialization (exposing the student to an organization's social and cultural aspects and making him/her feel part of the organization), informal communication with colleagues and networking opportunities in view of a future professional career. These aspects will of course be harder to achieve in a fully virtual setting. One of the aims of this publication is to look more closely at these issues and formulate strategies for addressing them. The same goes for the development of intercultural skills in a fully virtual setting. Further on we will go into the very specific challenge of developing intercultural competencies through virtual mobility.

The higher education institution

Internationalization of the curricula is a must for European higher education at present. Extending this need for internationalization to the work placements that are generally included in curricula provides extra opportunities for students and will enlarge the international attraction and presence of the study programmes.

While internship programmes are often locally already part of a broader structural cooperation between the higher education institution and local companies or organization, programmes for international internships represent an opportunity to stimulate knowledge exchange and feedback from international professionals.

The increased possibilities generated by flexible placement models through the integration of virtual mobility activities can also contribute to the attraction of a study programme. The introduction of virtually supported academic mentoring and peer feedback or group work can contribute to an overall enhancement of the learning experience being offered. A very clear advantage here is the possibility which virtual mobility offers for better quality control by the higher education institution of international work placements (continuous interaction with the student and the receiving company/organization).

The fully virtual work placement is not feasible in all study fields. For instance in medicine or nursing studies, it will not be possible to develop the required learning goals of the internship through virtual mobility activities. Other challenges the higher education institution has to deal with in this case can be the official accreditation of the virtual experience and a possible extra work load caused by the required detailed preparation of a fully virtual placement set-up.

The company or organization

Many companies are convinced of the added value of international (professional) experience for their (future) employees. Graduates with cross-border practical experience are perceived to be more independent and more flexible than their peers without this type of experience. At first sight in contradiction to this, the practice of hiring international interns seems to be not very widespread. For large companies this may be because of structural requirements, such as the planned timing of internships or the resources required to modify their existing internship programmes to include this format. For small and medium sized enterprises (SME's) this may be because they have a regional or national scope and therefore do not see the added value an international intern can bring. Another issue is the lack of structurally implemented internship programmes on an international level. Companies are not aware who to contact or what resources to consult if they want to find students from higher education institutions abroad or if they want to learn more about the possibilities for them in this area. The set-up of sustainable cross-border internship programmes can also be part of a broader knowledge exchange with the international academic world.

An international student can be an added value for a company, for instance to act as a bridge to foreign markets and networks, or to perform tasks that are strongly related to the knowledge of foreign languages. Sometimes companies are looking for students with a very specific profile that can only be found abroad at universities offering certain specialized study fields. For example this is the case of many companies looking to hire highly specialized engineering students.

Working with an international intern can also mean enrichment for the company staff: a possibility to learn more about other countries (markets to explore) and business types, or a way to work on the development of intercultural competencies. Companies mainly recognize the introduction of virtual mobility in work placements as a benefit in combination with physical presence at their premises.¹¹ For instance, additional coaching by an academic mentor during the placement abroad via virtual mobility activities will most likely also result in better task performance by the student.

Companies are on the whole more reluctant to accept the fully virtual variant because of the perceived absence of the human factor - its projected impact on trust and communication - and lack of control over the student's work. IT - security issues, organizational challenges and the extra work load for their staff (additional training, e-mentoring) could also pose a problem. In addition, not all tasks are suitable to be performed at a distance. Further on in this publication we will go into these issues and see if we can propose solutions to some of these supposed problems. Nevertheless it needs to be clear that we present the fully virtual variant only as one possibility in a wide spectrum of viable models for the integration of virtual mobility in work placements.



For small companies, the attraction of virtual placements lies in the structural flexibility of this type of placement. In larger companies there could be more room for virtual placements as ‘hotbeds’ for new technologies and ideas, as ways of exploring new cross-border collaboration methods. They could also serve as new instruments in the war for talent as a way to groom talent early and provide it many ways to engage with the organization. R. Straub¹² sees possibilities for the virtual placement as part of a larger evolution towards the ‘globally integrated enterprise’ in which virtual collaboration will become a must. Although he stresses that this is a future evolution and that the way enterprises are managed today is still very much based on traditions from earlier days: “A new balance will have to be struck between physical and virtual presence and collaboration, real and electronic ‘water-coolers’ for informal exchange and learning, trust building in in-person meetings vs. telepresence, to name a few examples. This is not just a technology challenge but a key management challenge for the 21 century.”

Bringing stakeholders together

When engaging in the organization and guidance of a work placement, higher education institutions, students and enterprises do not do this with the same motivation and goals. Whereas for the HEI and the student the learning goals are most important, companies evidently focus more on the performance of tasks that are relevant to their specific needs. The challenge exists in matching these different objectives. When introducing virtual mobility in the collaboration between student and company, an extra concern to be taken into account is to which extent both the didactical objectives and the real projects of the company can be realized through virtual collaboration.

Furthermore, there are several possible approaches to initiating work placements. For work placements that are part of a formal curriculum, the most common approach is the institution-driven approach (where the HEI is the driving force behind bringing the needs of different stakeholders together) or the student-driven approach (where the student is in charge of looking for and organizing an internship him/herself). When it comes to international work placements, the student-driven approach seems to be the most widespread. Nevertheless, when it comes to the integration of virtual mobility, the higher education-driven work method deserves preference for a number of reasons:

- The qualitative implementation of virtual mobility in the placement experience needs a lot of careful preparation and joint consideration. The knowledge and experience of academic mentors is strongly advised here.
- To make the investment in virtual mobility pay off for higher education institutions and companies, it is advisable that it is integrated in a sustainable internship programme that leaves room for evaluation and improvement and builds long term relationships between these two stakeholders.

9 Doru Talaba and Simona Lache, “EUE-Net Guidelines for Practical Placements of Students.” (Brussels: EUE-Net, 2010), 121. http://www.eue-net.org/_download/EUE-Net_Guidelines.pdf.

10 Hakima el Meziane, “Staat een internationale ervaring goed op je cv? Resultaten van de bevraging bij Voka werkgevers” (Antwerpen: VOKA - Vlaams Economisch Verbond vzw, Vlaams Netwerk van Ondernemingen, 2010), 5-11.

11 In the framework of the EU-VIP project (<http://www.euvip.eu>) company representatives in Belgium, Italy, Poland and Germany were interviewed to ask their feedback about the possibilities of virtual mobility in internships.

12 Richard Straub, “Preparing Managers for a Global Environment: Mobility, Flexibility, Agility and Openness.” In Home & Away Forum. Conference Proceedings, eds. Mart Achten, Ilse Op de Beeck and Wim Van Petegem (Heverlee, Belgium: EuroPACE ivzw, 2010): 28.

03

Framework



When integrating virtual mobility in international work placements, it is important to look at all different aspects of organizing and undertaking such a placement. What follows below is a framework listing these different aspects. Because of the specific situation of each different higher education institution, student and/or company, we have chosen not to present strict scenarios for the implementation of virtual mobility in international work placements, but rather on offering a widely applicable framework that can be adjusted and interpreted to suit specific needs.

The framework looks consecutively at the pedagogical foundations of work placements, the different actors involved in a work placement and the different phases of a placement with explicit attention for the conditions and consequences of virtual mobility activities. The possible integration of virtual mobility in the different phases is illustrated through examples and experiences from participants in a number of pilot projects trying out the possibilities of virtual mobility in internships (see chapter 5: Background: the EU-VIP project). This chapter closes with a look at the technology to support virtual mobility activities.

Pedagogical foundations

As we described in chapter 1 (Context and definitions), we see a work placement as setting itself apart from a student job through the inclusion of an intentional learning agenda in the experience¹³ and the assessment of learning outcomes at the end of the experience. In other words: in the context of this publication a work placement is seen as a teaching method which of course needs to be based on solid pedagogical foundations. These pedagogical foundations can be found in the ideas underpinning work-based learning.¹⁴ According to this pedagogical approach, there are three basic conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for a work placement to be a successful learning experience:

1. Learning needs to take place through experience and reflection.

Experiential approaches to learning have developed from the work of Kolb¹⁵ (the experiential learning cycle). This view on learning stresses the importance of a direct learning experience. It includes both theoretical and practical elements in the learning process. Experiential learning involves three phases:¹⁶ preparation - action and experiences - reflection. In work placements there needs to be a special focus on stimulating student reflection and self-assessment regarding the learning process that is structured into the experience.

2. Learning needs to take place in an authentic context.

In work-based learning, the learning experience starts from realistic, authentic problems. This approach emphasizes the importance of informal learning to develop skills and expertise in an authentic context.

3. Learning needs to take place as a social process.

Any work experience is situated within a social context. The learner becomes a part of a new community whilst still retaining links with and drawing support from the educational community in which she/he operates.¹⁷ This view has its basis in a socio-constructivist approach where learners build upon their previous experiences in interaction with peers and tutors to construct new knowledge and skills.

Ideally a work placement is conceptualized in such a way that it creates possibilities for learning under the conditions described above.

The different actors and their roles

Any work placement involves three different stakeholders: the student, the higher education institution and the receiving company or organization. Work placement is of course centred around the student who, individually or in group, is temporarily 'employed' by a company or organization to help it realize its (professional) goals.

The majority of the pilot projects used a set-up where one student undertook an internship for one company. Examples of student groups working for a company can be found in pilot 3 (see p. 36) where students were expected to work together as a department from a company which was located abroad. In pilots 6 and 9 (see p. 39 and p. 42-43) international student groups worked together to perform tasks for a company through virtual communication, simulating international team work with geographically dispersed colleagues.

The student(s) perform(s) the tasks that are attributed to him or her in interaction with others and aims to (further) develop discipline-specific and more general¹⁸ skills while addressing these tasks. Before and during the placement the student draws support and receives feedback from actors within his or her educational community. We can make a distinction here between actors providing primary and secondary support.¹⁹ With primary support we mean support aimed at facilitating the learning process. The academic mentor will help students realize their learning outcomes (discipline-specific and general) and stimulate them to reflect upon their progress. Secondary support focuses on administrative and organizational issues. In case of the integration of virtual mobility activities, it is advisable to appoint a staff member to provide technical support if necessary. Next to the support from staff members, the student can also still be linked to his or her educational community via peer students. This interaction will mainly focus on peer feedback.

Depending on the internal structure of the receiving company or organization, the human resources department will be normally involved in hiring and evaluating students (for instance in view of a potential job offer). In other cases students will be selected and hired directly by a line or project manager. Ideally a company member will be appointed as a tutor for the student. The role of such a tutor is to guide the students through the assignments and introduce the student to the company's organizational aspects and business culture. If this tutoring takes place largely through virtual mobility activities, it is in some cases advisable to foresee technical support for the internship tutor. This support could also be necessary for the co-workers who need to collaborate with the student at a distance.

In some companies the recruitment of the student might be done by another person than the intern's supervisor. It is nevertheless necessary that the company mentor is fully aware of the specificity of a (partly) virtual internship. The same goes for the intern's co-workers.

Phases of a work placement

From a time perspective, we can distinguish 3 different phases in setting up and undertaking a work placement: before, during and after the placement. In each of these phases one or more different actors are involved and virtual mobility activities can help to enable an optimal interaction between the different stakeholders. Every phase has its own attention points and issues.

These phases are widely recognized and we can see the same distinction in numerous publications regarding the organizations of work placements.²⁰ Proceeding the 'before' phase however, we would also like to define



a 'preparatory' phase in which the conditions for successfully organizing virtual(ly) supported international placements are created. When the higher education institution is the driving force behind the internships, this preparatory phase would include setting up a sustainable international internship programme with interested companies/organizations who are in need of interns and recruiting interested students for this international programme through good information and promotion, including an overview of grant possibilities. In the case of the plan to offer virtual placements, issues such as the accreditation of virtual experiences need to be carefully addressed.

In this publication we focus however on the qualitative integration of virtual mobility in work placements, starting from the phase right before a student undertakes his or her internship.

Phase 1: before the work placement

In this phase it is essential to plan the placement thoroughly in all its aspects. This careful planning is ideally the result of a discussion between the three stakeholders, as the figure below illustrates. Issues that need to be addressed here are:

- The desired learning outcomes (discipline-specific and general) and how these can be matched to the needs of the enterprise. When preparing an international work placement, intercultural skills should also be listed explicitly as learning goals. In addition to defining the main learning goals, the assessment criteria should also be determined in this stage.

In the pilots conducted by the KHLeuven (BE) (pilots 6 to 9, see p. 39-43) the SIS tool was used. This tool was developed by the higher education institution. It is an online self-assessment system on competences during performance at the work place. Before the internship it helps student select the competences they want to work on during their internship. During the placement it assists them in following-up and evaluating their performance. The student's information in the SIS tool is also accessible by the academic mentor. In the most recent pilots of the KHLeuven the company mentors were also invited to follow-up the student's entries via the tool.

- The tasks students will have to perform (broadly) and mutual expectations regarding these tasks. The most reported problem by students regarding work placements are their unfulfilled expectations²¹ regarding the nature and the level of the work. It is also important for the company to have a clear idea about the competences and level of the intern(s).

Pilot 2 (see p. 35)

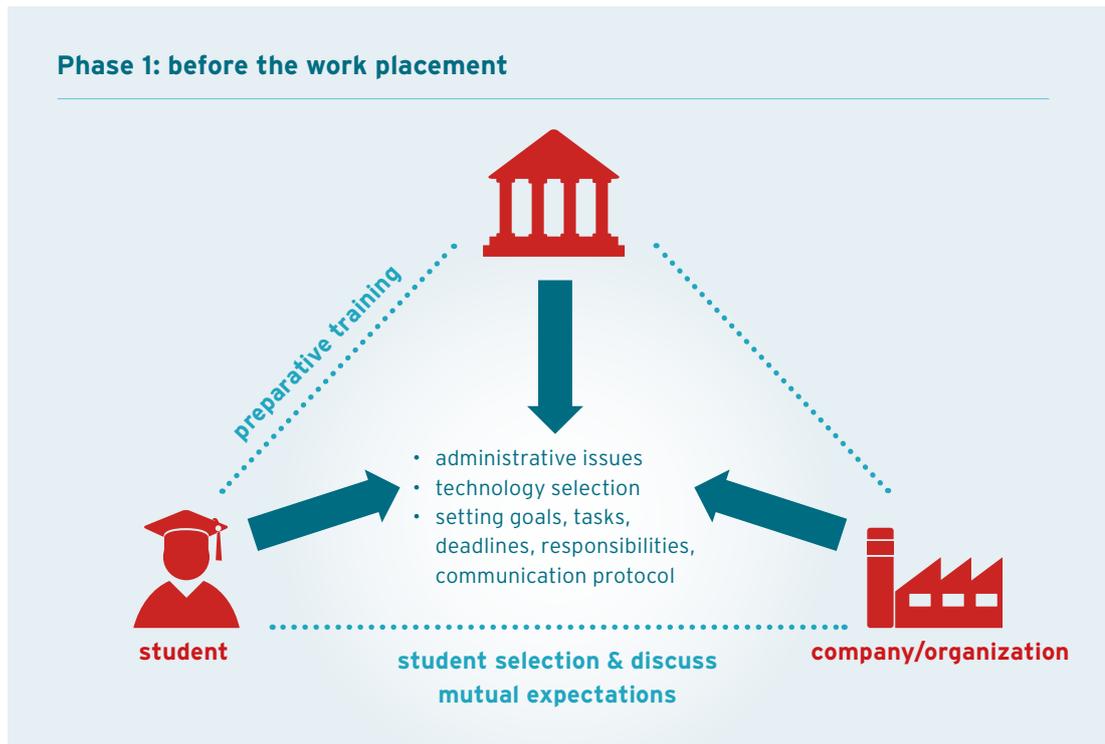
"The quality of the work performed by the students was poor and had in the end no real value for the company. It seemed the students were not fitted for the task. Students indicated more assistance from company and academic staff would have been necessary for them. This also resulted in a decrease of motivation during the internship."

Pilot 10 (see p. 44)

"The student indicates her motivation decreased, mainly because of lack of challenge in the tasks she was presented with. She was expecting tasks at a higher 'master' level."

- Roles and responsibilities of the different actors and whom to turn to in case of problems (for all actors involved), these actors can also include peer students. In a virtual internship for example it needs to remain clear that, even if the student receives face-to-face mentoring from the academic mentor, it is still the student who is employed by the company. The higher education institution does not become a consultancy company in this case.

Ideally all of these agreements, responsibilities and procedures are in the end part of a written agreement between all actors.



In the before phase there should also be room for preparatory training of the student, if necessary. Especially in the case of international internships it can be advisable to prepare the student for his or her experience abroad by addressing cultural, social and linguistic matters.

In pilot 14 (see p. 48) a virtual training programme was created for all students planning an internship in a foreign country, which would help them to better start their job experience abroad. Learning goals were the development of meta-cognitive skills and socio-cultural competences, such as integrating in a new work environment and a foreign country, as well as the acquisition of interpersonal competences that can be used in any work environment, such as the integration within a new organization, becoming part of a team, being flexible, being able to mediate, and being willing to learn step by step. Together with experts from the university's e-learning office the virtual training programme was set up, videos were produced, and a Moodle platform was created.

When virtual mobility activities are integrated in the placement, there are a number of extra attention points that need to be looked at in the 'before' stage:



- To ensure a smooth ICT-supported interaction between two or more stakeholders, it is strongly advised to draw up a communication protocol. Such a protocol can state when the different actors are available for synchronous communication, how much time can pass before an asynchronous message needs to be answered, which technologies will be used for which ends, when reporting is required, how the coaching process will be organized etc. Do not forget to take practical issues such as different time zones and fixed working hours into account.

Pilot 18 (see p. 52)

“The university arranged face-to-face meetings with the student to plan the internship in detail. During a Skype session, the student finalized the planning of her internship together with her company supervisor. The student had weekly assignments and had to update via Skype on a weekly basis. Other communication happened by e-mail. The whole process was also monitored by the HEI and potential issues and doubts were immediately dealt with. Both sides (student and the company) confirmed their positive opinion about the cooperation, task realization and satisfactory completion of the internship, mainly because there were no major problems and all deadlines were met on time.”

Pilot 2 (see p. 35)

“According to the company mentor, the biggest downfall of the virtual internship was the apparent ‘absence’ of the student and the waiting on e-mail messages. The student sometimes had the feeling of holding off the company mentor from her daily activities when asking for her time, because there were no clear arrangements or boundaries on their meetings. Lessons that can be learned from this experience are mainly that clear arrangements and procedures regarding communication, deadlines and milestones are absolutely necessary in a virtual placement.”

Pilot 13 (see p. 47)

In this pilot, where Indian students worked for a Finnish company, not only the different time zones had to be taken into account. An extra challenge was the fact that the Indian students did not have internet access after 8PM at the campus. All these issues had to be dealt with when finding a good way to collaborate.

- Select the ‘right’ technology in function of the previous experiences of the actors, the tasks to perform, the number of actors involved and the learning goals. Make sure all actors know beforehand how to use the chosen technology.

In the first two pilots conducted by Tietgen Business College (pilots 2 and 3, see p. 35 and p. 36) communication between student(s) and company happened mainly through e-mail and telephone. Evaluation results of these pilots clearly indicated that these communication channels did not suffice to create feelings of mutual trust and responsibility at a distance. In the third pilot (pilot 4, see p. 37) therefore additional technologies such as Skype and e-portfolio were introduced.

- Make sure the tasks will be achievable from a distance and still in line with the learning goals and of true importance to the company. In a virtual setting you need to make sure the time needed to complete the tasks is in line with the required ‘weight’ of the internship in order to receive accreditation.

Examples from the pilots of tasks that can be performed during a fully virtual internship: software development and testing; development of communication and promotion plans; (local) market research; desk research...

- Specific attention to a ‘helpdesk’ which actors can turn to in case of technical problems during the placement.
- Take issues like the ‘human factor’ and ‘organizational socialization’ (see further: conditions for success, p. 24) into account while setting up the virtually supported internship.

Virtual mobility activities by themselves can already present an added value in this phase. When the actors are geographically widely dispersed at this moment, a synchronous discussion regarding the design of the placement can take place through technologies such as Skype or videoconferencing. These (or other) technologies can also be used by foreign companies to select the right candidate among the interested students and to introduce this student already to the company. Preparatory training for instance in how to use e-tools during the internship can be offered simultaneously to students and company staff residing abroad.

In pilot 16 (see p. 50) for instance the internship was planned and defined in detail beforehand (goals, timing, steps, milestones, deliverables and outputs, technology) by the academic supervisor, the school’s teacher, the student and the Career Service staff through e-mail, telephone and a concluding video conference meeting.

In pilot 17 (see p. 51) Skype interviews were used beforehand to interview 5 candidate interns. The candidates were also asked to complete a written task.

Phase 2: during the placement

During the placement the focus will be on the student’s development of knowledge and skills through performing practical and authentic tasks for the company. Next to discipline specific competencies, the student will ideally also have the opportunity to work on generic skills like intercultural, teamwork, social and communication skills.

To stimulate the learning process, feedback from the academic mentor and/or peers to stimulate reflection is desirable. As shown in the figure below, the main line of interaction will be between the student(s) and the actors in the company (primarily mentor and co-workers). An academic mentor still has the opportunity to talk to the student abroad in a setting that is close to face-to-face contact via Skype or videoconferencing. Peer students can keep in touch with each other through tools like a discussion forum or social media. There also exist specific technologies as blogging or e-portfolio which can be used in particular to support reflection and self-assessment.

Technology to support reflection and self-assessment

In pilot project 13 (see p. 47) three Indian students undertook a fully virtual placement for a Finnish company, Massidea.org. The students were asked to report on a weekly basis by writing a “learning diary” online that was accessible both to the academic mentor and the company representative.

Virtual mobility for supervision and support by the higher education institution

In pilot 15 (see p. 49) a Blackboard-based online placement environment was developed for the supervision of students’ international work placements. The environment integrated existing communication tools such as Skype and Adobe Connect, an evaluation tool, as well as a newly developed supporting database (“Stagebook”) with personal pages and specific access rights for students and teaching staff, providing immediate access to internship details. The aims of the tool were to improve existing super-



vision of international placements, to enhance contact with interns abroad (also in emergency situations), to facilitate the sharing of information about interns between supervisors and to keep track of students in the different phases of the internship. The frequency and form of contact with interns during placements varied, depending on the study programme.

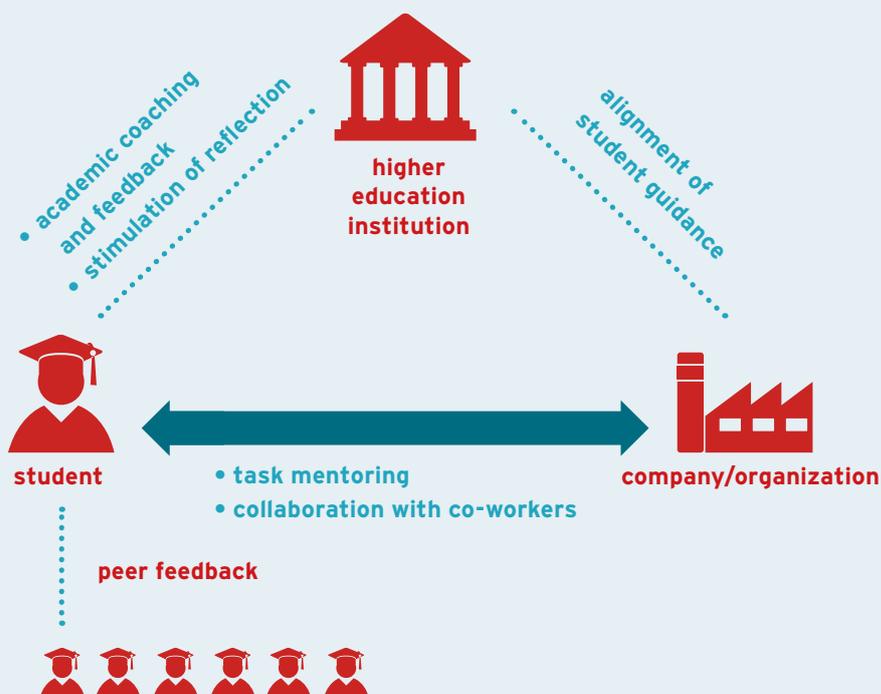
In pilot 5 (see p. 38) physical work placements were combined with virtual preparatory and evaluative support from the university via Moodle, Adobe Connect, e-mail and phone.

Examples of tools to realize peer feedback

In pilot projects 7 and 8 (see p. 40 and p. 41) students on an internship abroad participated in seminars with their peers at home via web conferencing. Students evaluated this as a good way to reflect on (inter) cultural topics, on differences in businesses, to learn about questions that other students have, to use non-verbal communication and to create a bond with peers.

In pilot 11 (see p. 45) a blog was set up for communication with the company mentor and other interns in the same company (peers) about task related issues. Students were asked to report on a regular basis about their activities, progress and problems encountered. The company mentor and the peers revised the posts and helped to find solutions in the event of problems.

Phase 2: during the placement



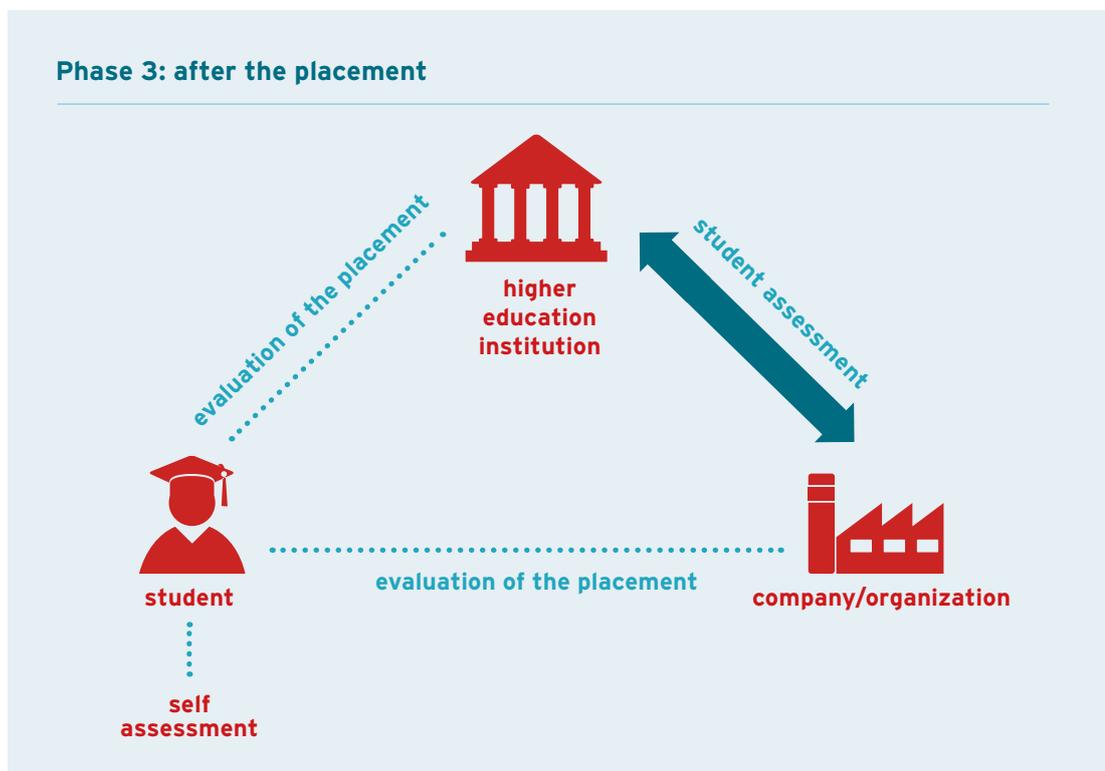
Virtual mobility can of course also present an advantage during an (international) work placement, because of the possibilities it offers to execute authentic tasks for a company without being physically present at its premises. The extra attention points that need to be looked at in case of such a virtual placement, are:

- Try to make sure the student feels part of the company even when he or she is not physically present and that the student is accepted and known within the company as a ‘virtual’ employee,
- Try to avoid isolation of the ‘virtual’ student and work on building mutual trust and a feeling of responsibility. In the before phase a procedure should be put in place to follow when the other party does not live up to the agreements made,
- Ensure qualitative e-coaching.

You can find more on addressing these attention points in chapter 4: conditions for success.

Phase 3: after the placement

In this phase evaluation is the central theme. Firstly there is the evaluation of the student according to the formulated criteria. Ideally the end evaluation or accreditation will be based on a joint decision of the company and the academic mentor; although the academic mentor will normally hold the end responsibility. Mostly, the student will also be asked to write a final report on the work placement, including a reflective self-assessment. In some cases this final report will can be replaced by a blog.



The cooperation between the higher education institution and the company or organization should also be assessed. Strong points and future opportunities need to be identified. Problems or difficulties should be examined so they can be avoided in the future.



In pilot 15 (see p. 49) an online placement environment was developed for the supervision, support and evaluation of students' international work placements. In the concluding phase of the placement, students submit their final placement reports to the platform. These reports are archived in digital form and are made accessible to future interns.

The technology

When using technology to support or facilitate international internships, the idea is of course that this technology is an aid and not a barrier. Above we have already described some essential points that need to be taken into account before the placement to make sure that ICT can perform its supporting role during the placement:

- **Accessibility:** Choose technology that is accessible for all actors involved. Higher education institutions and enterprises might use their own systems or platforms. Look at the possibilities of opening these up to users from outside. Not all companies allow the use of social media by their staff and not all learning platforms provide access to external users.
- **Usability:** Choose technology that is user-friendly and reliable. The stability of the internet connection of all three stakeholders also plays an important role in the usability of these technologies.
- **E-literacy:** Preferably work with tools that are already known to the actors involved. If this is not possible, make sure that the actors have the opportunity to learn how to use the technology (provide training possibilities).
- **Test and support:** Test the tools beforehand and make sure the actors involved know whom to turn to in case of technical difficulties.

Pilot 1 (see p. 34) confirms a need for guidelines on how to use the tools, because of differences in participants' ICT-skills.

Communicate explicitly about the ICT-infrastructure that will be used. Decide beforehand if you would like all actors to limit themselves to the use of the previously chosen technology (e.g. in case you want a clear documentation of the collaboration process) or if you will allow space for actors to bring in their own tools as they see fit in the process.

Technology can be used to different ends in the framework of international placements. We can make a rough distinction between the following goals:²²

- Information and instruction (non-interactive)
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Reflection

Some tools can of course be used to serve different ends at the same time. It is important to decide beforehand to which end you will use which tools.

Pilot 5 (see p. 38) illustrates that if you want participants to use certain tools, it needs to be clear why this technology is offered and what is expected of all actors involved

In all categories we can see the use of synchronous and asynchronous tools. Synchronous tools facilitate communication between users at the same time, like a video- or a web conference. The attractiveness of these tools lies in the direct contact between users, decreasing the feeling of distance between the users. Asynchronous tools facilitate communication independent of time, like e-mail or by writing a blog. Asynchronous tools tend to be more reflective, since there is time to formulate opinions and other information in a good and structural way.

The pilot projects clearly indicate that asynchronous communication tools do not suffice in a fully virtual setting. A mix of communication channels is advised. There is a need for the integration of synchronous communication with close resemblance to face-to-face communication, e.g. web conferencing or video conferencing, because it makes the communication feel more personal. Pilot participants also highly appreciate the quick reply to questions.

What will follow here is a description of the concrete tools used in the pilots. The tools have been categorized by the different goals distinguished above.

Information and instruction (non-interactive tools)

- **Instructional videos (online):** a good tool if you want to reach, inform or instruct a large group of students. The material can be consulted at different stages and can be used again by future students.
- **Online information via learning platforms:** the advantages of collecting (administrative) information about internships via learning platforms are the fact that it can be consulted anytime and anywhere; and that it can be integrated into a larger virtual 'internship' environment which also provides tools for communication and reflection.

Communication

- **E-mail:** the most commonly used asynchronous communication tool in all the pilots. It doesn't need an introduction anymore, since almost everybody uses it, especially in an international educational and/or work context. E-mail is mainly used for one-to-one communication or communication in a small group.
- **Telephone:** in general, web conferencing tools like Skype are preferred over telephony, because they offer the same functionalities for free. But, if only audio communication is needed, the telephone still provides the most stable connection and a higher audio quality. Telephone and e-mail contact do not suffice though in a mainly virtual setting as communication tools.
- **Web conferencing:** used to conduct online meetings and hold presentations over the internet with a group of two or more individual users. A widely used and in the pilots highly valued web conferencing tool is Skype. The free version of Skype combines group audio conferencing (or one-to-one videoconferencing and screen sharing) with chatting and document sharing. Another example of a web conferencing tool is the Open University's Flashmeeting. Some of the pilot projects used Adobe Connect Pro as a web conferencing tool. The advantages of this proprietary software are a better control over the discussion, live document sharing, viewing and annotating, as well as adding polls, questions and a chat possibility to the discussion. These functions make Adobe Connect Pro also a good tool for collaboration.
- **Videoconferencing:** A videoconference is a conference which allows participants at two or more locations to interact via two-way video and audio transmissions simultaneously,²³ mostly via especially dedicated systems. According to the INTERN project,²⁴ videoconferencing is the most useful communication tool in the context of virtual internships. Especially in a group working situation, videoconferencing seems to be more effective than web conferencing. Bigger companies tend to have videoconferencing rooms themselves, but the expensive equipment is at the same time the biggest disadvantage.



- **Social networking platforms:** On a social networking platform, each user has a profile through which he or she can share all kinds of (textual or audiovisual) information publicly or semi-publicly (only for certain groups of users) with other users of that platform. Social networking platforms can also be seen as collaboration tools, but in the pilots they were mainly used for communication. There are many online social networking platforms, but in the pilots only Facebook was used. Besides the fact that Facebook is free of charge, the main advantage was that the participating students already had experience with this platform, so there was no knowledge barrier.

Collaboration

- **Learning platform:** learning platforms or virtual learning environments are software systems that enable interaction between learner and tutor. They are well known in a higher education context, and several pilots have been using Moodle or Blackboard for facilitating information and audiovisual material to students. As stated above, learning platforms are also designed for interaction. The missing link here is obvious: where is the company? Some electronic learning platforms have restricted access for university students and staff only, but some can grant access to external people.
- **Microsoft Sharepoint:** this online project management tool was used in two pilot projects. Sharepoint is especially known for its document sharing function, in which users can synchronously work on the same document. Sharepoint also has other functions like blogging or rating and tagging documents.
- **Flowdock:** The proprietary software Flowdock is a so-called “team-messenger”, which can be used for communication and collaboration with both internal and external partners. Since it is linked with Twitter (a microblogging service) and Git (a widely used software version control system), it is a very practical tool for ICT-related work placements.

Reflection

- **(Group) Blog:** A blog is a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in reverse chronological order.²⁵ A blog can be written by one or more persons, the latter is called a group blog. The asynchronous nature of the blog allows students time to formulate their questions and reflections, and allows mentors to be flexible in their time scheduling.
- **E-portfolio:** An e-portfolio is a virtual version of the traditional portfolio, in which students show their work. Next to ‘works’ like reports, papers, projects, etc., an e-portfolio also provides room for feedback or evaluations by supervisors or colleagues. Ideally university as well as company mentors have access to the e-portfolio.

13 Sarah Cornelius, D. Medyckij-Scott, D. Forrest, A. Williams, and W. Mackaness. “The Virtual Placement: An Alternative to the Traditional Work Placement in the Geographical Sciences?” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 32, no. 2 (2008): 287-302.

14 Ulla Rintala and Claudia Schrader, “The EU-VIP project: Scenarios for virtual and virtually supported work placements.” EU-VIP. 2010. <http://www.eu-vip.eu>

15 David A. Kolb, *Experiential learning: Experiences as Source of Learning and Development*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ): Prentice Hall, 1984).

16 D. Boud, “Experience as the Base for Learning.” *Higher Education Research & Development* 12, no. 1 (1993): 33-44.

17 Sarah Cornelius, D. Medyckij-Scott, D. Forrest, A. Williams, and W. Mackaness. “The Virtual Placement: An Alternative to the Traditional Work Placement in the Geographical Sciences?” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 32, no. 2 (2008): 287-302.

18 Communication skills, intercultural skills, team work etc.

19 R. Kristensen, E. Källström, and J. Svenkerud, “Virtual Internships: Real Experience in a Virtual World. A Best Practice Handbook for Those Interested in the Concept of Virtual Internships in Business Education.” INTERN Project: Promoting advances in European Higher Business Education through ICT-supported Virtual Internships. 2002, 43. http://www.atit.be/dwnld/INTERN_best-practice_manual_final.pdf

20 See the following project websites for several of these publications: INTERN (http://www.atit.be/dwnld/INTERN_best-practice_manual_final.pdf), 121 (<http://www.internship2industry.eu/>), EUENet (http://www.eue-net.org/_download/EUE-Net_Guidelines.pdf)

21 Sarah Cornelius, D. Medyckij-Scott, D. Forrest, A. Williams, and W. Mackaness. “The Virtual Placement: An Alternative to the Traditional Work Placement in the Geographical Sciences?” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 32, no. 2 (2008): 287-302.

22 Ilse Op de Beeck, Katrin Bijneens, Wim van Petegem. Home & Away. Coaching exchange students from a distance. (Heverlee, Belgium: EuroPACE ivzw, 2010), 50-51.

23 Ibid., 65.

24 R. Kristensen, E. Källström, and J. Svenkerud, “Virtual Internships: Real Experience in a Virtual World. A Best Practice Handbook for Those Interested in the Concept of Virtual Internships in Business Education.” INTERN Project: Promoting advances in European Higher Business Education through ICT-supported Virtual Internships. 2002, 46. http://www.atit.be/dwnld/INTERN_best-practice_manual_final.pdf

25 Ilse Op de Beeck, Katrin Bijneens, Wim van Petegem. Home & Away. Coaching exchange students from a distance. (Heverlee, Belgium: EuroPACE ivzw, 2010), 56.

04

Conditions for success



Student characteristics and motivation

Not every student will be able to undertake an international placement that involves a high level of virtual mobility activities. Especially in the case of a virtual placement, the student involved will need to have good meta-cognitive skills, i.e. he or she needs to be able to take control of and plan their own learning process. A virtual placement is therefore more suitable for students with a higher level of prior education (e.g. master students). A target group that is prominently suitable for virtual placements are adult learners, who would also benefit most from this flexible opportunity to undertake an international internship. In case students with lesser meta-cognitive skills embark on a virtual adventure, a stronger support during the placement by the academic staff will be required.

Pilot 2 (see p. 35)

“...a student undertaking a mainly virtual placement should have the necessary skills and maturity to plan his own work and learning process and take initiative.”

Pilot 18 (see p. 52)

“The student chose to participate in order to be able to do an internship in his own free time, because he already has a full-time job. ... Both sides (student and the company) confirmed their positive opinion about the cooperation, task realization and satisfactory completion of the internship,... The added value of virtual mobility lies in gaining international experience through cooperation and work for international companies, working in your own free time, working full time and having opportunity to do internship at the same time, ...”

Students preferably already possess the necessary ICT skills and have previous experience with virtual mobility activities. If this is not the case, they will need proper instruction and time to practice and experiment with virtual communication before the placement starts. In general, motivation seems to be one of the major reasons why internships succeed or fail in their learning objectives.²⁶ A high intrinsic motivation of the student is even more important when it comes to bringing a virtual placement to a successful end. But a high student motivation at the start of the internship will not suffice. Motivation will need to be fed and stimulated throughout the entire enterprise. Important factors here will be:

- The quality of the e-coaching provided
- Integration of the human factor into the virtual experience
- The quality of the tasks that need to be performed:
 - Tasks need to be in line with the expectations of the student regarding the contents of the placement,
 - Tasks need to be achievable in terms of difficulty, available time and resources; but they also need to be challenging at the same time.²⁷
 - Tasks need to be authentic and must be part of real projects addressed to satisfy real needs of the enterprise.

In the second pilot project (see p. 35) the task of the virtual intern consisted of developing a registration system for an international conference. The conference organizers depended on the student for the development of this system. Afterwards the student declared that the best thing about this internship was the feeling of responsibility, which was beneficial for self-motivation. In other pilots (for example pilot 18, see p. 52) students in a virtual internship setting have the same experience: their motivation is influenced positively by the importance of the task and the responsibility that comes with it.

Involvement and commitment of all actors

Not only the student needs to be highly motivated to bring a (fully or partially) virtual placement to a good end. Because of the required preparation and crucial tutoring quality, the integration of virtual mobility activities in placements needs to receive proper support from the managerial level within the higher education institutions and the companies or organizations involved. Mentors and placement coordinators need to be motivated to guide students through the process. This motivation is more likely to flourish in an environment where they have been specifically assigned this task and receive sufficient time and recognition to perform it in a satisfactory way.

A structural implementation of virtual(ly) supported placements, as part of a sustainable internship programme, will also help to gain general acknowledgement of and support for this type of internship. It is likely that a virtual placement will take a lot of time and 'getting used to' the first time around for all actors involved, but this will improve when tutors, co-workers, managers etc. have previous experiences in this area.

Pilot 12 (see p. 46)

Pilot 12 (see p. 46) was evaluated as a successful internship. Guidance by the company mentors mainly took place in a virtual way. The student reported on a daily basis to the company representatives. This intensive mentoring contributed to the mutual satisfaction of student en company at the end of the internship, but was of course very time-consuming.

Pilot 19 (see p. 53)

A striking example of how lack of commitment is an even bigger threat to a virtual placement than a 'traditional' one is pilot 19 (see p. 53) in which the involved company stopped communicating with the student after the initial phase. More thorough (written) and structural agreements between the student, the higher education institution and the company beforehand could have been one way to avoid this unfortunate situation.

Quality of e-coaching

We use the term e-coaching here as an umbrella concept which comprises all related terms like e-mentoring, e-tutoring, virtual support etc. E-coaching is coaching from a distance with the help of technology. It can be done using synchronous and asynchronous tools. The coaching can be aimed at one individual or at a group of people.²⁸

Coaching can be about exchange of information, about training or instruction or about giving feedback. This last function is the most important in a student-coach interaction, but also the most complicated. It is important to have a clear idea about the objective of the feedback before giving it. The academic mentor will focus in the first instance on providing the student with insight regarding his or her learning process (is the student on his/her way to reach the set learning goals?) and to stimulate student reflection and self-assessment. Feedback from the company tutor will be mainly aimed at the performance of the task at hand. Peer students can also be involved as e-coaches. Try to determine beforehand what the main function of the peer feedback will be and communicate this to the students.

In the event of a large number of students and a limited amount of e-coaches, it can be a solution to use virtual group settings (e.g. through video or web conferencing) in which peer feedback can also be included.



Except for the quality of the feedback, there are a number of extra attention points when it comes to making 'e-coaching work:

- It is strongly advisable to work with a communication protocol that defines the practical conditions for the coaching process.
- A good protocol will help to establish a feeling of availability of the e-coach. It is crucial that students can 'feel' the presence of the e-coach(es).
- A good protocol is needed even more in a virtual group setting in order to prevent a chaotic and uneven discussion.

The internship model

Work placements exist in many shapes and sizes. Not all types of work placements are equally suitable for the integration of virtual mobility activities in the interaction between student and company/organization. Internships can differ in length: there are very short 'work experiences' mainly aimed at immersing the student in the basic concepts of a professional function and there are long-term internships in which the student really becomes an employee for several months. Virtual internships work better on a long-term basis. In this way there will be sufficient time to build up trust via virtual communication and to get familiar with this 'new' way of working. Virtual internships can create possibilities for students (e.g. adult learners) to undertake long-term international work placements when they are not able to stay abroad for a long period of time. The virtual aspect really becomes an added value when a flexible work organization is allowed.

A lot of work placements from higher education students are organized following the, what we might call, 'Laissez Faire' model: students are sent out to companies without much preparation before or guidance from the educational community during the placement. The concrete contents of the placement are up to the receiving company.²⁹ It is already clear from everything written above that the transfer of this model to a virtual internship is unlikely to be successful. The integration of virtual mobility in a placement will require a 'Formally Structured' model which comprises thorough preparation, clear agreements and strict communication procedures.

Work placements can also differ as far as the general goal is concerned. Placements can be aimed mainly at discovery (short work experiences), specialization, recruitment or assisting in a specific company project. For the latter type of internship it will most likely be less necessary to be involved in all day-to-day activities of the company. Therefore this type will also be more suitable to be performed at a distance.

Pilot 4 (see p. 37)

"A clearly defined task which can stand by itself seems to be most suitable for a fully virtual approach."

The human factor

Face-to-face contact between the actors at the company/organizations and the student at some point in time is almost always beneficial to the success of the activities. These contacts are important in building mutual feelings of trust and responsibility. For the company involved, face-to-face contact also creates a feeling of control over the student's work. For the student on the other end there is less risk to start feeling isolated. Ideally a limited amount of face-to-face contact moments (e.g. at the start, the middle and the end of placement) are arranged.

Pilot 17 (see p. 51)

“Shortly before the [virtual] internship, the student went on a three-day orientation trip to Brussels to get to know the office and its context, as well as her colleagues. ... The orientation trip to Brussels, where the student got to know the colleagues and the work environment is seen as a key success factor by all stakeholders. It made the student a real part of the organization and stimulated her personal motivation.”

Pilot 16 (see p. 50)

“The only downfall of this virtual internship was that the student felt alone sometimes (even with both mentors constantly at his disposal), but according to the student this eventually lead to being more independent and self-confident. The school teacher found it hard to initially trust and estimate the skills of the student through virtual communication, but that feeling went away gradually. He also sees a potential problem in the handling of emergencies, but there were none during this internship.”

If this is not possible, there are a number of attention points to take into consideration that can help reduce the risk factors described above:

- Choose technology that creates the possibility to interact synchronously in a setting that is as close as possible to a face-to-face setting (e.g. video or web conferencing).
- Consciously define space for non-task-related communication. (e.g. talk about other projects of the company, the news, social events, etc.)
- In case a student does need extra control during task performance, an academic staff member could also fulfill this controlling role.
- Consider letting students work in a team to perform tasks for a company.

Organizational socialization

The overall design of the placement plays an important role in realizing ‘organizational socialization’, i.e. exposing the student to an organization’s social and cultural aspects and making him/her feel part of the organization/company. Organizational socialization is what makes the difference between conducting an isolated student project and undertaking a work placement. If we want to make the work placement a social learning process in an authentic context we need to pay attention to this point, even in a traditional setting where the student is physically present at the company’s premises. The degree in which organizational socialization can be realized is related to the length of the internship, to the degree in which interns are able to collaborate with different members of company staff, to the degree in which interns are allowed to work on tasks that are of real value to the company, etc. In a virtual interaction between company and student, organizational socialization is even more difficult to realize. Try to avoid a strict one-on-one setting. Concrete strategies here are:

- Inform the student elaborately about his or her virtual co-workers and provide information about how and when everybody can be reached (e.g. through the creation of an online environment with pictures and contact information).
- Also make sure all company staff members involved are informed of their temporary ‘virtual’ colleague and of what is expected from them as far as collaboration is concerned. The first time around this will probably ask for some adaptation and guidance.
- Opt to work with electronic collaboration tools which allow group interaction, such as Skype (group audio conferencing) or Adobe Connect (group video conferencing and document sharing).
- Let the trainee participate in staff (or other) meetings via video conferencing.

**Pilot 4 (see p. 37)**

In pilot 4 the interns actively participated in (technical) team discussions via Flowdock (a collaboration web application), Skype, Adobe Connect (a web conferencing tool) and other collaboration platforms.

Pilot 18 (see p. 52)

“Although the student didn’t feel very responsible towards the company, she felt absolutely as if she were part of it, because she was aware of the importance of her task. The company contradicts this by stating that the student couldn’t possibly have been part of the company, because of the short time, the small task and because there was no need to cooperate with other employees except for two company supervisors.”

Intercultural skills development

The main goal of internationalization is to develop intercultural competencies: to enable students to tolerate and embrace differences without feeling threatened in their own identity.³⁰ An international work placement of course provides an excellent opportunity to work on these skills in a professional environment. However, the development of these type of skills is not self-evident just because a student is exposed to another cultural environment. Even in traditional physical international internships, intercultural competencies are only really acquired when explicit attention is paid to the development of these competencies. From before the internship the student should be aware of what ‘intercultural competencies’ are and that it is an explicit learning goal to work on these competencies. During the placement, students need to be stimulated to reflect upon this on a regular basis. Essential here are formative assessment and feedback, also from peers in similar situations. Virtual mobility activities through video or web conferencing, or through the use of discussion forums, e-portfolio etc. are prominently suitable to support this process of feedback and reflection at-a-distance with the student in one country and the academic mentor and/or peer students in another.

Gaining intercultural competencies in a virtual setting is of course still an entirely different matter. There is no ‘immersion’ in the other culture as will be the case during a stay abroad. Body language and intonation will also be less on the forefront during virtual interaction. Nevertheless it is possible to at least develop a sense for dealing with cultural differences through virtual mobility activities if the following points are taken into consideration:

- As for ‘traditional’ internships: explain beforehand, give feedback and stimulate reflection. This is always of key importance.
- Focus on differences in written communication, negotiation styles, business cultures, decision making processes (e.g.: formal vs. informal communication; importance of hierarchy;...)
- Do not limit the interaction to a one-on-one situation. In this case personality traits will be more determining for the experience than cultural identities.
- The student preferably has previous experience with virtual communication.

Pilot 6 (see p. 39)

In pilot 6 part of the students’ preparation of the internship consisted of doing cultural research. In the end the students claimed they did experience a difference in culture and doing business through (mainly) virtual collaboration. They identified this as one of the advantages of the experience.

Pilot 7 (see p. 40)

In pilot 7 students on an internship abroad participated in seminars with their peers at home via web conferencing to discuss experiences during the internship. This resulted also in “internationalization@home” for those peers who undertook local internships. Hearing about and discussing the experiences of students abroad also enlarged the local students’ awareness of international differences between business cultures.

Pilot 8 (see p. 41)

In pilot 8 the required development of intercultural competences during the international placement was clarified and defined for the students before the placement during an information session by giving examples of online tests that probe these skills.

Pilot 13 (see p. 47)

Pilot 13 is another example of how a virtual internship can result in experiencing cultural differences, for the students as well as for the company mentors. These differences were mainly focused around the (Indian) more directive and hierarchical way of organizing work flow and the (Finnish) working environment in which initiative and free decision making are highly appreciated.

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- 26 Amy McManus, and Andrew Hale Feinstein. “Internships and Occupational Socialization: What are Students Learning?” *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning* 35 (2008): 128-137.
- 27 R. Kristensen, E. Källström, and J. Svenkerud, “Virtual Internships: Real Experience in a Virtual World. A Best Practice Handbook for Those Interested in the Concept of Virtual Internships in Business Education.” *INTERN Project: Promoting advances in European Higher Business Education through ICT-supported Virtual Internships*. 2002, 51. http://www.atit.be/dwnld/INTERN_best-practice_manual_final.pdf
- 28 Ilse Op de Beeck, Katrin Bijmens, Wim van Petegem. *Home & Away. Coaching exchange students from a distance*. (Heverlee, Belgium: EuroPACE ivzw, 2010), 46.
- 29 E Doru Talaba and Simona Lache, “EUE-Net Guidelines for Practical Placements of Students.” (Brussels: EUE-Net, 2010), 121. http://www.eue-net.org/_download/EUE-Net_Guidelines.pdf
- 30 According to the INCA project, there are six components of intercultural competence: tolerance of ambiguity, behavioral flexibility, communicate awareness, knowledge discovery, respect for otherness and empathy. See: Elisabeth Prechtl and Anne Davidson Lund. “Intercultural competence and assessment: perspectives from the INCA project.” In *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*, eds. Helga Kotthoff and Helen Spencer-Oatey. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 467-490.

Conditions for success

summary

Preferred student characteristics

- High metacognitive skills, maturity
- Experience with virtual communication
- Highly motivated

Qualitative e-coaching

- Clear agreements about goals and roles
- Following an established communication protocol

Qualitative tasks

- In line with student's expectations
- Achievable and challenging
- Authentic and of importance to the company
- Suitable for distance work

Commitment of all actors

- Managerial support for tutors, mentors and co-workers
- Prior written contract between all actors
- Preferably the internship is part of a sustainable internship programme (structural implementation)

Internship form

- Formally structured through careful preparation and clear agreements
- Preferably long-term
- Avoid a strict one-on-one setting (involve co-workers, allow virtual participation in team meetings)

Integration of the human factor

- Arrange a limited amount of face-to-face contact moments if possible
- Use technology that supports synchronous communication in a setting that is as close as possible to a face-to-face setting,
- Define space for non-task-related communication.

Tools as an aid (and not a barrier)

- Choose technology that is accessible for all actors involved
- Choose technology that is user-friendly and reliable
- Test tools beforehand and provide guidelines and support
- Communicate explicitly about the tools that will be used and to which end they will be used

05

**Background:
the EU-VIP project**



About the project

This publication is the main result of the EU-VIP project. EU-VIP stands for Enterprise-University Virtual Placements. The project looked into the possibilities virtual mobility can offer in the area of international work placements.

EU-VIP was funded by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme. It ran from October 2009 until September 2011. The project brought together 16 partners from 8 different countries. To ensure the success of the project all stakeholder groups were represented: the consortium was composed of higher education institutions and European non-profit associations of universities, businesses and students:

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE), coordinator • University of Bologna (IT) • Aalto University (FI) • West Pomerian Business School (PL) • FernUniversität Hagen (DE) • Laurea University of Applied Sciences (FI) • EAL, TietgenSkolen (DK) • Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven (BE) • University of Padova (IT) • University of Groningen (NL) • EADTU (NL) • Coimbra Group (BE) • EuroPACE ivzw (BE) • EFMD (BE) • BEST (FR) • University of Turku (FI)

Firstly, the project established a state-of-the-art report regarding virtual and blended placements. Starting from this document and additional research, the partnership put together a scenario for organizing virtual and blended work placements. This scenario served as a general framework to design and implement 19 pilot projects (see further). These pilots all varied on the scale from a very limited to a very far-reaching integration of virtual mobility activities.

Before executing the pilots, pilot participants (students, teaching staff, administrative staff, company mentors...) received local training adapted to their specific needs (development of technology skills, help while implementing the general scenario, how to undertake e-coaching). After pilot execution, all participants contributed to the evaluation of the pilot, via surveys and/or interviews. The feedback from the pilot participants was used to further expand and fine-tune the framework and to identify critical success factors for the integration of virtual mobility in internships.

During the project a lot of attention was also paid to identifying the needs and the benefits for all stakeholders. To this end, two stakeholder meetings were organized to collect feedback on (intermediary) project outcomes: one in Berlin (DE) on the 1 December 2010 and a second one in Mechelen (BE) on the 27 April 2011. These meetings were aimed at representatives from higher education institutions and from the business world. The students were addressed through the organization of two BEST symposia: one in Ljubljana (5 to 9 July 2010) and one in Riga (22 and 23 August 2011).

Next to the online version of this manual and a quick guide to integrating virtual mobility in international work placements, the project website (www.euvip.eu) also includes some audiovisual training material and links to other resources regarding virtual mobility and international internships.

The EU-VIP pilot projects

19 pilot projects were conducted in the framework of the EU-VIP project. These pilots all vary on a scale from a very limited to a very far-reaching integration of virtual mobility in work placements. The pilots described below are also used to illustrate the framework (chapter 3) and the critical success factors (chapter 4) described earlier in this publication.

Improving student support during a work-based learning programme for adult learners

Aalto University, Finland
January - August 2011

Project description

Eighteen academic unemployed participated in a recruiting training programme, organized by the Aalto University Professional Development, which provides continuing education and development programmes for professionals. Eighteen Finnish companies provided work placements for the participants. The purpose of the recruiting training programme was to offer new employment opportunities to the participants in the field of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) by providing GIS technology education. Learning goals and skills for each participant were collected in a personal development plan. Learning on the job during the work placements formed the most important part of the training.

Virtual mobility activities were introduced mainly to improve the collaboration between the university and the companies involved and to enhance the support (mentoring and communication) of the trainees during their work placements.

Each participant started out with a personal development plan which collected the learning goals. An online e-learning platform (Optima) was used for the distribution of lecture and other course material, as a discussion forum and a site where assignments could be handed in. During the placement the students had the opportunity to develop an online portfolio (using the service Kyyvyt.fi) with evidence of their learning process and personal project results. Synchronous communication tools such as Skype and web conferencing were used for tutoring sessions between company mentor, university tutor and student.

Project evaluation

Evaluation results confirm the need for tutoring and a better collaboration between all actors involved in the work-based learning process. Guidelines for using the e-tools are helpful because not all participants possess the same ICT-skills. Imposing a pre-defined structure for the learning process in general improves the quality of this process, although flexibility and student initiative must be given enough room, especially when dealing with adult learners.



Virtual work placement at a European organization (SPACE)

Tietgen Business College, Denmark
October - December 2009

Project description

One Latvian bachelor student in the Entrepreneurship programme participated in a virtual international internship at a European organization with its administrative office in Denmark (the SPACE organization). The student was asked to develop a registration system for an international conference to be held in Budapest. The system should keep track of all delegates concerning hotels, meals and social events, and in this way form the basis for the budget follow-up for the conference. The student was also asked to track all abstracts submitted for the conference and set up a draft programme for the event and follow up on the programme based on full papers received for the conference and delegates registered. Additionally, the student had to develop a virtual conference book for the conference. The involvement of the higher education institution was minimal. Communication mainly happened between company and student via e-mail, as well as during four face-to-face meetings.

Project evaluation

According to the student, the best thing about the internship was the feeling of responsibility, which was beneficial for self-motivation: the student states that the feeling of responsibility arose from working alone on a task of importance to the organization and being the only one executing the assigned task. According to the company mentor, the best part of the internship was the realization of the new registering system. One of the downfalls of the blended internship was, according to the student, being distracted by local daily life while working alone at home. According to the company mentor, the biggest downfall was that, because of his absence and the waiting on e-mails, it seemed that the student was sometimes lazy. The specificity of the student's tasks had consequences on several levels: the student didn't feel integrated into the company and didn't feel motivated to come up with new ideas. The company mentor confirms this by stating that she missed initiative and suggestions by the student: she came up with initial solutions that the student later only optimized. For the company, the virtual part of the internship seems to be more time-consuming compared to an internship where interns are physically present. The student sometimes had the feeling of holding off the company mentor from her daily activities when asking for her time, because there were no clear arrangements or boundaries on their meetings.

Lessons that can be learned from this experience are mainly that clear arrangements and procedures regarding communication, deadlines and milestones are absolutely necessary in a mostly virtual placement. Next to this, a student undertaking a mainly virtual placement should have the necessary skills and maturity to plan their own work and learning process and take initiative. Attention should also be paid to establishing regular contact in between face-to-face meetings and a feeling of being part of an organization. E-mail as a communication tool is most likely not sufficient to achieve the latter.

Virtual internship from 5 international students at the company Jeros

Tietgen Business College, Denmark
October - December 2009

Project description

A group of five international bachelor students from Romania and Bulgaria participated in a virtual internship at the Danish major appliances manufacturing company Jeros. Prior to the internship the students visited the company to get an understanding of the products, facilities, organization etc. The student team had an office inside their own university, where they worked on a thorough description and analysis of a number of potential markets. They were expected to work as a team, acting as a department of the company. Presence at the office was mandatory during 'office hours' and checked upon by the university's administrative staff. The contact went mainly by e-mail and telephone. Involvement of the higher education institution was limited to supervising the presence of the students.

Project evaluation

The participants in this project recognize the added value of virtual mobility (easy, cheap, intercultural experience while staying at home) and the students reached most of their learning goals. The quality of the market analysis performed by the students was nevertheless very poor and had no practical value for the company. It seems that the students participating were not personally and professionally suitable for the challenge. The students that were involved in this pilot were also united because of their inability to find a work placement themselves.

The students did not really feel part of the company. Being present at the office every day full-time seemed hard to match for the students. They sometimes felt isolated, and did not know what was expected from them. More assistance from company and academic staff certainly would have been necessary. This also resulted in a decrease of motivation during the internship. The students reflected on the internship in various ways: whereas one student claims not having learned a lot, another cherished the possibility to practice working for a company with fellow students. The academic staff came to the conclusion that in the case of a virtual international internship, the requirement for the student's seriousness and professional engagement is possibly larger than is the case at an ordinary internship. The requirement for the company's efforts should not be underestimated and must be reconciled. The limitation of technology used to e-mail and telephone also seems to have an impact on the degree of student involvement.



Virtual internship from 2 Danish students at Laurea University in Finland

Tietgen Business College, Denmark
December 2010 - April 2011

Project description

Two bachelor students of the Software Development Programme participated as testers in international virtual internships at Massidea.org, which is part of the Laurea University of Helsinki. General learning goals were to learn how to work in a multicultural/multi-language company and to apply some of the theory from the curriculum. Based on experiences from previous pilots (see pilot 2 and 3) some new elements were introduced in the set-up of these virtual internships. E-portfolio technology was introduced for student support and follow-up. The students also actively participated in Massidea.org technical team discussions in Flowdock (a collaboration web application), Skype, Adobe Connect (a web conferencing tool) and other collaboration platforms. During the internship the academic staff had weekly meetings with the students, in which they coached the students and helped them reflect on their experience.

Project evaluation

Most of the general learning goals were reached: the students learned how to work in a multicultural or multilingual environment, and have had the possibility to use theory from a course in “real life”. According to the company, the students performed the assigned tasks in a satisfactory way, but they were not as ambitious/thorough as expected. This can be related to the fact that the students felt that they needed a better and more complete introduction to the company as well as more documentation on the technology and the tasks they should perform to get started. The academic mentors missed a proper introduction to the project and the key people involved. One or more additional face-to-face meetings could have been beneficial to the pilot’s progress. A clearly defined task which can stand by itself seems to be most suitable for a fully virtual approach.

Pilot 05

Supporting 34 internships through virtual mobility activities

Open University of Hagen, Germany
October 2010 - March 2011

Project description

Thirty-four BA students of Educational Science at the Open University of Hagen were involved in blended internships at various educational institutions that ranged from adult education, schools, universities, and childcare to various other fields and institutions (e.g. social work, research, professional training). The blended internships were a combination of physical work placement combined with virtual preparatory and evaluative support from the university via Moodle, Adobe Connect, e-mail and phone. The duration of the individual internships ranged from 3 to 16 weeks. Learning goals were to develop educational scenarios in practice by applying educational theories and methods. Students developed the competences to understand concepts and used methods within the work-task, applied analytical and technical skills, communicated practice-based problems and reflected on them. Moreover, they were able to acquire technical competencies for practical operation in the field of education. After the internship, students had to document their tasks and reflect on them with the aid of educational theories.

Project evaluation

In order to investigate whether students are satisfied with their internship, particularly with the support from the university's side, a quantitative student-oriented evaluation was conducted.³¹ Thirty-four students participated by filling in a questionnaire (mean age = 37.97 years, SD = 9.62). The survey was divided into five main categories (general satisfaction with the internship, support of advisors, platform Moodle, information materials, communication technologies), mostly measured on a five-point rating scale from (1) "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (5). In general, the internship based on a blended-scenario is accepted as a valuable component of professional education. The results revealed a high satisfaction of students with their internship ($M = 1.9$, $SD = .48$) and the learning module ($M = 2.3$, $SD = .52$) in which the internship was embedded. Students are also generally satisfied with the support ($M = 2.7$, $SD = .54$), but would like to have quicker replies to their questions, as well as a larger range of consultation hours via phone. In an attempt to provide closer links between field experience and the theoretical guide from the university's side, a range of different communication technologies was embedded on Moodle. Most students visited the Moodle platform quite often, but less than half of the students state that they used the platform for the preparation of their internship. The information materials facilitated the preparation ($M = 2.5$, $SD = .32$) as well as the documentation of the internships ($M = 2.2$, $SD = .31$), but only 20 of 34 students agreed or strongly agreed that the information given on the Moodle platform reflected the relevant issues of the internship module ($M = 2.6$, $SD = .66$). Based on the results, the rationale for choice of the different technologies seems to be unstated or unclear, and evidence of the effectiveness even more so. The survey has shown that supervision is predominantly needed at the end of the internship for questions about how to report the internship. Here, students' used more traditional media like phone, mail, and platform-forum to contact the mentors. On the contrary, the virtual classroom for presentation and discussion as well as chat was rated as more inefficient. Thus, a further assignment of those technologies without clear instruction of how and when to use them seems not to be effective.

³¹ Because of the amount of internships, FernUni Hagen chose a quantitative evaluation method. This evaluation method differs from other EU-VIP projects that mostly applied qualitative and summative evaluations.



International Innovation Lab: work placements for international student groups (2010)

KHLeuven, Belgium & Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Finland
February - June 2010

Project description

Four Belgian and six Finnish Bachelor students in Business participated in work placements, doing market research for a foreign company. One mixed group of Belgian and Finnish students conducted an analysis of the Belgian market for the Finnish company 'Core Finland' (food import). Another Belgian-Finnish group made an analysis of a specific market segment (youth), commissioned by the Belgian newspaper 'De Standaard'. Learning goals for students were to be creative and develop new ideas to match the demands of a younger customer target group and to explore new markets for a new product. Additionally, Belgian students needed to develop at least three of the ten generic competences that are part of work placement competences in the Business Management programme. Finally, students had to write a final report on the project. The project was prepared through a web conference with students in which arrangements with teachers abroad were made. Belgian students visited the Belgian company. At the beginning of the project, the Belgian students visited the Finnish students and met with the CEO of the Finnish company. They gave a presentation on the Belgian company, followed-up by a brainstorming session. The following phase consisted of virtual contact between students, companies and teachers. This resulted in conducting market research and writing a business plan. To communicate and cooperate with the commissioning company and the students abroad, video conferencing, Skype, SharePoint and e-mail were used. During the last week of the project, the Finnish students came to Belgium. This time a face-to-face presentation for the Belgian company was organized and a virtual presentation for the Finnish company. The Belgian students also used an online self-assessment system to reflect on their learning process by evaluating their progress regarding the achievement of previously formulated learning goals.

Project evaluation

Before, during and after the work placement, students were asked to complete questionnaires about their expectations and experiences. Students prepared the internship by reading, writing a project plan, following an innovation course and doing cultural research. They expected to use e-communication and work in a truly international experience as a team and use English to communicate. They expected as possible pitfalls technical problems, lack of social contact among the students and difficulty in understanding each other. During the internship, the participants (including the academic staff) saw communication with foreign partners without travelling and communication on a more personal level using web conferencing instead of e-mail as added values of this project. Students also considered it good practice for language learning. It was found that there was a big difference in culture and doing business. It was also pointed out that it is important to find the most suitable students for the project and that the project definitely needed to be supported by using web conferencing. As advantages, getting experience in long distance working, and an additional value for your CV were mentioned. Experiencing a foreign company culture was also mentioned as an advantage. The use of technologies like Skype and video conferencing is seen as much more personal than communication via e-mail. Although, we have to add that in the end the students thought there were too many video conferencing moments planned (scheduled twice a week). Difficulties were that the language was sometimes a barrier in communication and that the nationalities kept to themselves. Participants found that there was not enough interaction between students. As added values, however, participants saw getting to know another culture, good language practice and using a new tool as important. They also mentioned that the virtual setup provided a fast and cheap way of conducting an international project and gave them the opportunity to really experience working in an international team.

Business Management: Supporting International Internships (2010)

KHLeuven, Belgium
February - May 2010

Project description

Eleven Belgian Dutch-speaking bachelor students from Business Management and Office Management undertook a work placement abroad. The internships took place in seven different countries around the world. Learning goals for students were to develop three of the ten generic competences put forward by the Business and Office Management study programme. Students were expected to perform in a realistic work environment related to their field of study. As a preparatory measure, an information session was organized for the students and the academic mentors at the start of the work placements. They were briefed on the use of the virtual tools to ensure academic support during their stay abroad. Web conferencing was used frequently to discuss the students' experiences with the academic mentors and with their peers who stayed in Belgium. E-mail was used to communicate with the individual students on a more personal basis. The SIS tool (a self-assessment system on competences during performance at the work place) was used to help students select, follow-up and evaluate their performance during their work placement. Finally, an e-portfolio tool allowed students to post and store all documents that related to their final report. These documents could be accessed and commented on by the academic mentors. The role of the company mentors in the work placements consisted of advising the students on their activities and evaluating their performance based on generic and professional competences.

Project evaluation

The evaluation of the internships contained three questionnaires. The first survey asked students about their preparation and expectations. Students contacted the internship companies mainly via e-mail or phone, after doing research on the company via Internet. The culture of the host country was known because of previous visits or having lived in the country. The expectations for the work placement related mostly to accumulating job/field-related knowledge, experiencing different cultures, improving language skills and becoming more independent. Relating to the virtual support they expected clear instructions and everybody making an effort to ensure the success of the virtual guidance, and saw as possible pitfalls technical problems, different time zones and the fact that they needed to plan the web conferences into their daily schedule at the company. A second questionnaire was held during the internship, this time also among the academic mentors. Students as well as academic mentors were positive about using web conferencing as a tool because it is cheap, easy, faster than e-mail, closest to interaction in person, a good way to keep contact with the academic mentor and offers possibilities to ask questions and getting answers right away. The participants saw as pitfalls of web conferencing technical problems, short sessions, coping with the time difference and not enough individual time with academic mentor. The use of the SIS system was experienced as a practical system to select competences and follow-up and provide the academic mentor with a tool to check students' progress. However, both students and mentors thought it was a complex system and was not user-friendly. The results of the final evaluation were that web conferencing is a good tool to inquire about the final report and presentation, reflect on (inter)cultural topics, reflect on differences in businesses, learn about questions that other students have, have the ability to use non-verbal communication and create a bond because of organized contacts. In some cases an individual discussion between student and academic mentor took place. A too short scheduled time, the difficulty to speak freely and different time zones were seen as pitfalls of web conferencing. The use of web conferencing to give support to the student abroad also resulted in an 'internationalisation@home' experience for their peers who undertook their internships at local companies. Hearing about and discussing the experiences of the students abroad also enlarged the local students' awareness of international differences between business cultures.



Business Management: Supporting International Internships (2011)

**KHLeuven, Belgium
February - May 2011**

Project description

This pilot was organized in follow-up of the pilot described above as number 7. Three Belgian Dutch-speaking bachelor students from Business Studies and Office Management (BSOM) participated in blended work placements in China, Spain and the UK. Nine students did their placement in local companies, but participated in the feedback sessions with the students abroad. Learning goals for students were to develop two of the ten generic competences put forward by the BSOM study programme and writing a final report on a project or research that they did during their work placement. As a preparatory measure, the digital follow-up system (SIS) was translated into English so that the company mentors together with the academic mentors could follow-up on the competences of the students. An information session was organized by the academic mentors, informing students on intercultural competences by giving them examples of online tests that probed these skills. Some of the activities that students performed as interns were: manufacture cost accounting, bookkeeping, contacting potential clients and partners, creating presentations, assisting in organizing events, e-marketing, and translating documents. During the internship several follow-up sessions were organized, both on a group level (web conferencing) and on an individual level (e-mail and SIS-tool). Students closed off their work placement by giving a presentation on their work.

Project evaluation

The evaluation of the internships contained three questionnaires. The results of the first questionnaire were that students who did a traineeship abroad found the companies through personal contact and acquaintances. The trainees abroad saw as possible pitfalls that they would be mentored less than the other students at home and they feared that they would only receive written feedback at limited occasions on parts of their final report without any face-to-face sessions. They saw as an added value of doing a work placement abroad, practicing their professional and language skills in a foreign environment. The home students and the academic mentors stated that during the Skype feedback session, various students could not be present at the same time. Overall, they found web conferencing a good tool for discussing problems and tasks and a good alternative to meeting when physical contact is not possible. They also thought it was a good way to keep in contact with the students abroad and learn how the workplace was different in other countries. The results of the second questionnaire indicated that the pitfalls of the virtual support were the repeating of questions and answers as well as no visual contact with the home students during the discussions due to a bad internet connection. However, they found that web conferencing was still a good tool for organizing follow-up sessions, because it gave the opportunity to ask a lot of questions and receive immediate answers in comparison to e-mail. SIS was conceived as a practical and user-friendly tool to select and follow-up on the required competences, offering the possibility of commenting on the choices. In the final questionnaire, the students at home and abroad compared the web conference via Flash meeting with the web conference via Skype. They preferred Flash meeting, because of a better connection and visual contact. The academic mentors thought that the system worked well, but that the students should prepare questions in advance. The Flash meeting was more complicated than the Skype meeting because students had to take turns. The academic mentors mentioned that students were willing to participate, reached their learning goals and showed positive progress during their placements. They believed that company mentors did not need to be trained in the use of SIS because this could be done by the trainees. Although SIS was translated into English, it was not used by the company mentors, probably because of a design failure. Furthermore, there was a delay in providing the placement companies with the correct access code to SIS in English.

International Innovation Lab: work placements by international student groups (2011)

KHLeuven, Belgium & Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Finland
October 2010 - June 2011

Project description

This pilot is a repetition of pilot 6 during academic year 2010-2011. Six Belgian bachelor students of Business Management Marketing and six Finnish bachelor students of Business Management participated in an international virtual work placement at the Belgian “Museum M”. The aim of the project was to develop creative ideas to raise the number of “M-bassadors” (i.e. privileged members of the museum), based on market research (brainstorming sessions and target group surveys). The results of this research were used to review Museum M’s database and prepare and implement a communication event. The Finnish students were involved in supporting the Belgian students in reviewing the database, giving input on directing questionnaires, setting up the communication event and providing the students with ideas seen from the Finnish point of view. Learning goals were to focus on two out of ten of the generic competences dealing with working in a business environment, as well as evaluating their self-set goals and actions to reach those goals, based on the results of their performance. As a preparation for the internship, web conferencing was set-up with students and arrangements with teachers abroad were made. The students researched the different membership programmes of museums in their countries, read books on innovation and social media and visited different museums. Additionally, the Finnish students did a desk research on social media that could be used in this project. At the beginning of the project, the Finnish students visited KHLeuven and the Museum M for an intensive workshop week. The following phase consisted of virtual contact between students and teachers. The Belgian students and teachers met the staff of the museum in person. During the last week, the Belgian students travelled to meet the Finnish students, visiting a Finnish museum and giving a debriefing of the project. They also prepared presentations which they gave by web conferencing for the Museum M staff in Belgium. Students closed off their work placement with several assessments and by giving a presentation on their results.



Project evaluation

The students filled out questionnaires at the start, during, and at the end of the pilot. The academic mentors and the museum mentor filled out a questionnaire at the end of the pilot. The results of the first questionnaire stated that students participated in this project to gain international experience, to improve their English and to work as a team. As added values, students expected international cooperation, learning from other cultures, learning to use new technology and learning how universities abroad operate. They expected of virtual communication that it would be easier to communicate with foreign students and would provide a wider view on work and create new ideas. After having met the other students physically at the start of the project, they expected that future virtual communication would be a lot easier. As pitfalls they predicted technical problems and very limited communicative participation during the virtual sessions. In the second questionnaire, students indicated that they worked via e-mail and Facebook for individual communication and worked via e-mail, web conferencing, Skype and Facebook for group communication. They thought that communicating via web conferencing was good to improve their English, to communicate with people abroad, to have visual contact with each other and that it stimulated motivation. They thought that web conferencing provided a wider field of vision and that additional project-related activities, like the workshop on innovation, offered new insights. Besides technical problems, another pitfall students analyzed was that virtual communication resulted in spending more time with the different participants because of linguistic problems, misunderstandings and different background knowledge. A result of the third questionnaire was that differences in background knowledge and presentation skills played a part in the quality of the project. As to the virtual support, students concluded that a good mix of communication channels was useful. The academic mentors mentioned in their questionnaire that students learned to cooperate with international students, share ideas, and that local organizations benefited from international cooperation. As an added value of virtual communication they stated that it was cheap, more effective than e-mailing and that web conferencing made group discussions possible. The Museum M was very pleased with the involvement of the students and the execution of their tasks. From the perspective of the Museum M, the intercultural experience was rather limited. The virtual mobility activities raised awareness of the importance of virtual tools.

Combining multiple international experiences through virtual mobility

K.U.Leuven, Belgium
January - June 2011

Project description

This pilot was organized in cooperation with the master programme in Cultural Studies. This programme includes a compulsory internship (short and long track) and has a number of students who in the same period are undertaking an Erasmus exchange. The pilot looked at the possibilities of organizing a virtual international internship for them.

Specifically, one Belgian student undertook a fully virtual internship for an organization in Greece in combination with an Erasmus exchange in Spain. The receiving organization was the Dora Stratou Dance Theatre. Two co-workers from this organization were actively involved in guiding the student through her internship tasks. In general, the traditional internship model used in the curriculum was transferred to this virtual internship. This means basically that the organization of the placement was in hands of the student and the contents of the internship were determined by the receiving organization. Higher education staff was only involved at the beginning to receive a written internship agreement and at the end to receive the internship report from the student and quotation by the receiving organization. The most important interaction technology used was Skype. The student did some research work and worked on the development of a website. The online software used for this also allowed for a supervision of the work going on. This was a flexible work placement in terms of work organization: during the total term of 6 months, a work load of about six and a half weeks had to be fulfilled.

Project evaluation

The lack of preparation and involvement of the higher education staff was clearly felt during this pilot. Except for the use of Skype technology, there were no prior agreements made about the communication process which resulted sometimes in frustration for the actors involved when it was difficult to reach the other party. There were no possibilities (financial and practical) to meet face-to-face before or during the internship and clearly the sole agreement about using Skype did not suffice to integrate the human factor into the experience. The student expresses that there continued to be a feeling of distance towards the organization. Communication happened in a very fragmentary way, only about concrete issues related to the student's tasks. The student also indicates her motivation decreased, mainly because of the lack of a challenge in the tasks she was presented with. She was expecting tasks at a higher 'master' level.

In the end, the actors are still convinced of the possible added value of virtual international internships. For a student it can provide ways to combine an exchange abroad or a study at home with an international internship. For an organization it can mean bringing outside knowledge into the daily routines. All actors now, however, realize that a virtual internship needs a lot more and better preparation and prior agreements in order for it to 'work', an important lesson learnt for the future...



Student guidance through blogging and Skype

K.U.Leuven, Belgium
March - June 2011

Project description

The Media and Learning Unit (MLU) of the K.U.Leuven hired four bachelor students in Applied Computer Sciences to work together on a specific company project. Their task was to elaborate an existing streaming media service. In this general project they were all assigned specific sub-tasks. The students worked at the premises of the company, but because the company mentor was not always physically available there, virtual communication activities were integrated in the student guidance process. First of all a blog was set up. The main goal of this was communication with the mentor and the other students about task related issues. Students were asked to report on a regular basis (every one or two days) about their activities, progress and problems encountered (if any). The company mentor (and other members of MLU) revised the blog posts within a maximum interval of two days. They gave feedback to help the students find solutions for the problems encountered. Feedback also came from the other students who sometimes encountered similar problems. During the next academic year this internship will be repeated in a similar way using the same blog technology. The blog results of this internship will then serve as an archive for the new students to consult and they will continue to build on the collected knowledge.

Next to the blog, there were also regular team meetings as part of the guidance by the company mentor. At times when the mentor was abroad, Skype technology was used to conduct these meetings, so the regular routine of project meetings was not interrupted.

Project evaluation

Both the company mentor and the students were satisfied with the use of the blog. The mentor indicates that the students used it as requested on a regular basis and that the peer interaction via the blog also showed a real involvement in what was happening there (it was more than just an 'obligated' tool). The students state that they used the blog in the first instance because it was requested by the mentor and because they knew it was actively checked by him and other co-workers of MLU. Nevertheless, in retrospect they really appreciated the opportunities it offered for archiving their work, the problems encountered and the solutions found (e.g. in view of afterwards drawing up their internship report). Other added values were the preparation of the team meetings through the blog reports and the possibility to learn about the work of their peers and help each other out. They knew they had to use the blog frequently, but they appreciated the fact that there was some flexibility as far as the interval of reports was concerned (one to three days). According to them, this kept it doable in combination with their other tasks. In the beginning the tool asked for some getting used to, but they quickly felt at ease using it. The mentor reports that there was a difference in the way the different students use the blog: some limited themselves to short, very descriptive posts; others took time to reflect deeper on the tasks and provide thorough descriptions about certain programming issues. The students themselves also recognize this difference. In view of a re-use of the blog in a following internship project, they therefore advise to instruct students beforehand about what kind of posts are expected (maybe by referring to best practices). Also regarding technical possibilities and how they should be used (e.g. tagging), some more instruction could be given. Skype was seen by all parties as a very good solution to the practical problem of the mentor's absence. The students did find there was more of a distance felt during these Skype meetings.

Virtual company mentors, real clients

Pilot 12

Laurea University, Finland
July - September 2010

Project description

An Indian bachelor student of Business Information Technology at Laurea University participated in a blended internship within the International Expertise programme (IES), which partly took place at the Laurea University laboratory and partly at different clients of the IT consulting partner company, Clientiv Oy. The student provided IT testing and support to several clients of the company (among which Nokia). Furthermore her duties involved creating a testing lab framework, looking for new innovative ways to support smartphone application testing, executing testing plans using remote connections to Clientiv Oy's customers and solving IT problems. Mentoring by the two company mentors took place partly in a virtual way, mainly using Skype. The main objective of this internship was to analyze the learning potential of blended internships, gaining an insight into what it is like to be working in a company without having to work close to the supervisors. The internship was prepared between the university and the company, who had already worked together organizing regular internships. During the internship the student reported on a weekly basis to the university supervisor. The student also reported on a daily basis to the company representatives as everyday different testing tasks were involved. At the end of the internship a meeting with the company and the university was made in order to define the trainee's learning experience, performance and the future of blended internship collaboration.

Project evaluation

The internship was generally a success, although there is a need to improve the preparation phase for the student as it took more than two weeks to fully understand the projects aims and the form of working. Furthermore, this internship was very innovative as it allowed the student to work at several locations, bringing expertise to various clients and similarly getting to know different working environments and different working tools within the IT sector. Moreover, this type of internship is very useful for students in order to meet working professionals and to start building a personal network. At the end of this internship, the intern was offered a position at Nokia (one of the clients that the intern had worked at) and still to date (20.06.2011) she is working there as an IT tester. Additionally, Clientiv Oy and Laurea University agreed on the further development of blended internships. It is a very flexible and relatively inexpensive form to bring international expertise into enterprises. Similarly, for Laurea and its students it is a very innovative and risk-free form of offering internships and work opportunities to talented students. This pilot will be repeated, most likely not only with Clientiv Oy, but also with other companies.



Interns in India working for Finnish Massidea.org

Laurea University, Finland
October 2010 - March 2011

Project description

Three Indian bachelor students of Computer Sciences and Engineering at the National Institute of Technology (NIT) in Hamirpur, India participated in a fully virtual international internship. The students were asked to further develop the website of the internship partner Massidea.org, a Laurea University spin-off company that aims at sharing ideas with people from different latitudes in the world in order to network. Learning goals were that the students achieve practical experience by using different tools and programming languages in a real case assignment. Moreover, the intercultural understanding was a key aspect in the learning experience that created value during the internship. The agreements for the internship were made during a visit of the Finnish staff in Hamirpur, after which the NIT selected the right students. In a Skype meeting with all participants, further details and time schedules were arranged. During the internship, the Massidea representative kept up constant communication with the interns by e-mail, Skype, Flowdock (a collaboration web application) and other instant chatting tools. Additionally, there was always a supervisor in India guiding and assisting the interns throughout the internship. The students were asked to report on a weekly basis by writing a “learning diary” online that helped both the representative of Massidea (content responsible) and the representative of NIT Hamirpur (responsible of the quality deliverables).

Project evaluation

Virtual internships appeared to be an excellent, flexible and risk-free opportunity to initiate collaboration with our Indian partners, at the same time being an excellent opportunity for the students to gain international expertise. Overall, all the parties in this project were satisfied, specially the Massidea representative, as the students did an excellent job. The students however suggested to further develop the concept of virtual internships as there is yet very little information and training material for this practice on the web. The NIT representative agrees that virtual internships will shape the future of learning of the students and it will be very beneficial to implement this practice as compulsory in the near future. The most innovative aspect of this internship was the fact that it was conducted not only in another country but also on another continent making it a very rich experience in cultural understanding. In the Hamirpur campus students do not have access to the internet after 8pm. This issue brought many challenges at the beginning since the group of students had difficulties to find time to work for the assignment. Furthermore, the Indian learning methodology is very traditional and conservative with great respect towards the professors and supervisors, whereas in Finland and specially in Laurea, the teaching approach is very practical and based on the LbD (Learning by Developing) model developed at Laurea seven years ago. Therefore the Massidea representative needed to adapt to the way Indian students are used to work, in the sense that they depend very much on what the supervisor commands them to do. On the other hand, the Indian students needed to adjust their practical thinking to a more innovative and free environment where they could freely take decisions and put them into practice. The virtual internship will definitely be repeated. Laurea and NIT have signed a mutual understanding agreement where both parties agree on the further development of virtual internships for implementation in the curriculum.

Pilot 14

Virtual training programme for an internship abroad

University of Bologna, Italy
May 2010 - June 2011

Project description

The International Internship Office of the University of Bologna sends hundreds of students abroad every year through three international internship programs. The aim of this pilot was to create a virtual training programme for all students planning an internship in a foreign country, which would help them to better start their job experience abroad. About 70 Italian students (average age: 23-25) from different faculties of the University of Bologna were involved in the pilot prior to their departure. Learning goals were the development of meta-cognitive skills and socio-cultural competences, such as integrating in a new work environment and a foreign country, as well as the acquisition of interpersonal competences that can be used in any work environment, such as the integration within a new organization, becoming part of a team, being flexible, being able to mediate, and being willing to learn step by step. Together with experts from the university's e-learning office, the virtual training programme was set up, videos were produced, and a Moodle platform was created. Students were informed and asked to take part in the pilot in January 2011. Their internship abroad was to start in a period of time between February and June 2011. In a face-to-face meeting, the virtual training, its aims and the technology behind it (Moodle with flash video applications, slides, and a forum) were explained to the students. After the presentation as well as after their internships, students had to fill out an online assessment and several students were interviewed.

Project evaluation

The project was evaluated in a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods and consisted of questionnaires to students before and after their placement experience, plus several interviews made to several pilot users upon their return from the placement. Although half of the students have already had an internship experience and 65% already had experience abroad, only a small percentage of the participating students (6%) had received specific training prior to their work placement. All respondents were satisfied with the preliminary information received on the objectives of the pilot and on the technical issues related to the e-learning platform (Moodle), including the necessary assistance during the training. The vast majority of the sample (80%) considered the platform sufficiently well organized, accessible and pleasant, describing it as "easy to use" (90%). The overall evaluation of the virtual training programme has been positive. 80% of the respondents have declared that their expectations have been either sufficiently or fully met. Some of the respondents have expressed their particular appreciation of the clarity and practical features of the information provided, either preferring the module in preparation of the experience abroad or the module concerning the job market approach. Some criticism and suggestions for further development have been presented by the users, in particular on the lengths of some units and on the usefulness of the information provided. However, these criticisms or suggestions are not consistent with each other (i.e. some users criticize one unit which is particularly appreciated by other users and vice versa). These different approaches can depend on the different background experience of the users who participated in the pilot. The International Relations Office of the University of Bologna intends to offer the two virtual training modules to all students who are either going abroad or starting a placement period abroad.



Improving online support of work placements

Pilot 15

University of Groningen, The Netherlands
July - December 2010

Project description

In this pilot, the placement office of the University of Groningen, together with the ICT & education office and three degree programmes (Euroculture, Humanitarian Action and Journalism), developed a Blackboard-based online placement environment for the supervision of students' international work placements. The environment integrated existing communication tools such as Skype and Adobe Connect, an evaluation tool, as well as a newly developed supporting database ("Stagebook") with personal pages and specific access rights for students and teaching staff, providing immediate access to internship details. The aims of the tool were to improve existing supervision of international placements, to enhance contact with interns abroad (also in emergency situations), to facilitate the sharing of information about interns between supervisors, the participating degree programmes and the placement office, and to keep track of students in the different phases of the internship. During the pilot, the environment was offered to all interns in the programmes concerned. The tool was used for supporting the usual work placement process: informing students about ways of finding internships, supporting the application process, making a detailed placement plan, supporting the student during the work placement and evaluating the internships. The frequency and form of contact with interns during placements varied, depending on the study programme. The online environment was particularly relevant to the students in the international study programmes, since they spend part of their studies in one of the partner institutions of the Erasmus Mundus programmes (Euroculture and Humanitarian Action). In the concluding phase of the placement, students submitted their final placement reports. These reports have been archived in digital form and made accessible to future interns.

Project evaluation

The data below were collected during different stages of development of the online placement environment. Of the total of 21 respondents, 6 interns are from Euroculture, 5 from Humanitarian Action and 10 from Journalism. They fulfilled internships with print and broadcast media, embassies, consulates, companies and NGO's in the Netherlands, elsewhere in Europe and Africa and the Middle East. Most students (81.0%) completed the placement in the agreed period and were generally satisfied with the duration (76.2%). When questioned about the learning objectives of the placement, students rated "the ability to put knowledge into practice" slightly higher than employers, whereas for employers "the ability to plan and effectively manage time" were more important than for interns. Also employers found "the ability to adapt to new situations and act accordingly" slightly more important than students. Immediately relevant for the project were the questions on communication and interaction. Students indicated that they were mainly informed about placements by the student advisor or lecturer (66.7%), but they used other information channels too. 33.3% had used Blackboard or the placement office website (which was still in place at the start of the project) for finding out more about placements. This is in fact a lower percentage than for the faculty as a whole (i.e. if degree programmes not participating in the project are also included). We have no explanation for this, but it may have to do with the fact that the question is about the use of the placement office site, whereas the project has established the degree programme sites as entry point for placement information. A large majority of students (95.0%) indicated that the placement information was sufficient. This is in fact slightly higher than for all faculty interns together (88.1%). Whether this is an effect of the project would, however, be speculative and will be subject for further evaluation. The online environment has now become an integral component of placement support with the degree programmes mentioned. It will be extended to other programmes. Possibly placement providing organizations will be given greater access to designated areas of the environment and be more closely involved in the use of online communication tools.

Setting up a Moodle environment from a distance

University of Padova, Italy
February - May 2010

Project description

An Italian student in a master course on e-learning and media education was asked to design and set up a Moodle platform, containing video lessons, exercises and tests for a school in Switzerland (Istituto Elvetico). The learning goals of this fully virtual internship were applying theoretical and practical e-learning knowledge, enhancing IT skills, making judgements on the activities and learning materials, and gaining communication skills through online and audiovisual interaction with the different actors of the project. The internship was planned and defined in detail (goals, timing, steps, milestones, deliverables and outputs, technology) by the academic supervisor, the school's teacher, the student and the Career Service staff through e-mail, telephone and a concluding video conference meeting. During the internship, the communication between the school and the student happened mostly via e-mail and Skype and was aimed at monitoring the student's activity and providing feedback about the development of the platform. The contact between the university supervisor and the student was mostly by e-mail and face to face and provided reflection on the activities and learning materials. A periodical video conference was organized for the communication between more than 2 people, for example in meetings between the school, the university staff and the student, to show the intermediate results and to discuss any problems/difficulties. The student tested and finished the Moodle platform on time and it is currently used at the Swiss school.

Project evaluation

All stakeholders were satisfied with the internship, because the practical and learning goals were achieved on time and there was a very good level of cooperation and communication. The motivation of the student was high and he was continuously stimulated to self-reflect on the activities. The added value of the implemented virtual mobility activities can be found on different levels. On an educational level, the student was able to attend university courses and enhance his IT skills while doing the internship. On a logistic level, the school didn't need to create a workspace for the student and the virtual mobility created a very strict but effective time management for all stakeholders. Also the potential of virtual mobility for students who can't leave their home country for various reasons is clearly recognized by all stakeholders. The only downfall of this virtual internship was that the student felt alone sometimes (even with both mentors constantly at his disposal), but according to the student this eventually led to being more independent and self-confident. The school teacher found it hard to initially trust and estimate the skills of the student through virtual communication, but that feeling went away gradually. He also sees a potential problem in the handling of emergencies, but there were none during this internship. All stakeholders agree that the development of intercultural competences through virtual mobility was limited to a few formal work procedures. The feeling of being part of the organization (the Swiss school) was limited to the contact between the student and his (school) mentor, but the student had a deep sense of responsibility for the project. According to the university, this pilot has opened up new horizons on virtual mobility. Another faculty has begun to think about a way to implement fully virtual internships in the field of international policy and diplomacy. Although this fully virtual internship was very successful, blended internships could be a better alternative, because companies often prefer to physically meet the interns, and because the situation is more manageable when tasks aren't well-defined. That's why there has to be a very careful selection of the company/institution and also the aims of the internship must be very clear and verifiable.



Blending Turku with Brussels

Pilot 17

Turku University, Finland
October 2010 - January 2011

Project description

A master student in Political Science from Turku University (UTU) did a fully virtual internship at the Turku-Southwest Finland European Office in Brussels. She chose a virtual internship because her family situation didn't allow her to go abroad. The learning goals of the internship were gaining work experience in her own field of study, acquiring deeper knowledge about the European Union and its functions, improving communication skills, applying theoretical knowledge and improving meta-cognitive skills. Beforehand, the student was selected out of 5 candidates through an interview by the employer via Skype and a written task. A face-to-face meeting with all stakeholders was arranged in Turku to plan and define the internship in detail. Shortly before the internship, the student went on a three-day orientation trip to Brussels to get to know the office and its context, as well as her colleagues. During the internship the student's tasks were following EU news, producing news to current affairs reviews, following proposal requests, following parliamentary meetings online and reporting them, following and reporting commission events, compiling a financial aid guide of the EU's external aid programmes and supporting the preparation of slide shows. The student had a workspace in her home institution and met with a mentor twice a month to discuss and reflect on the progress of the internship. Next to Skype and e-mail, Adobe Connect Pro was used to keep in contact with the employer, especially for its document sharing function. After the internship, another face-to-face meeting with all stakeholders took place in Turku for evaluating the internship.

Project evaluation

In general, all stakeholders are satisfied with the result of the virtual internship, because the student performed in an excellent manner and reached her learning goals. Being physically distant from the organization requires pro-activeness, responsibility and ability to work independently and the student possessed all of these qualities. According to the employer, these qualities have to be well considered when recruiting a trainee/employee that will work "virtually". All stakeholders state that the added value of the implemented virtual mobility activities is that it enables students otherwise not able to participate in an internship abroad to gain international work experience to some extent. According to the participants of this pilot, the downfalls of a virtual internship are twofold. First, the limited range of tasks that can be done as remote work is considered a possible threshold. Second, a busy schedule outside of the office makes it hard for the employer to contact the student. Moreover, it seems that the student is more easily forgotten because of a lack of physical presence. The orientation trip to Brussels, where the student got to know the colleagues and the work environment is seen as a key success factor by all stakeholders. It made the student a real part of the organization and stimulated her personal motivation. Good experiences with the pilot led UTU Career Services to add virtual internships as part of their services. UTU acknowledged them as a possibility for students to gain (international) work experience.

Desk research for an Italian business school

West Pomeranian Business School, Poland
January - April 2011

Project description

A Polish Bachelor student of Economics and Business Organization participated in a fully virtual internship, doing desk research for the ISTUD Foundation, an Italian independent business school that operates in the field of executive education, advanced lifelong learning and in the field of management research. The student mainly made literary reviews on the internationalization of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's). The student chose to participate in order to be able to do an internship in his own free time, because he already has a full-time job. Learning goals were gaining intercultural experience, putting knowledge into practice, gaining valuable and study-related work experience, successfully completing tasks involving writing reports on international SME's systems, and improving language skills. In the preparatory phase, the project was promoted at the university as well as by an interested local radio station. The university arranged face-to-face meetings with the student to plan the internship in further detail. During a Skype session, the student finalized the planning of her internship together with her company supervisor. The student had weekly assignments and had to update via Skype on a weekly basis. Other communication happened by e-mail. The whole process was also monitored by the HEI and potential issues and doubts were immediately dealt with. The student was able to meet all deadlines and submit everything on time.

Project evaluation

Both sides (student and the company) confirmed their positive opinion about the cooperation, task realization and satisfactory completion of the internship, mainly because there were no major problems and all deadlines were met on time. The added value of virtual mobility lies in gaining international experience through cooperation and work for international companies, working in your own free time, working full time and having the opportunity to do internship at the same time and applying your knowledge in an international environment without leaving your home. Additionally, the company benefited from an international resource without having to invest in staff and/or travelling costs. Lack of the physical aspect, limited communication time between student and employer and the accompanying waiting times are seen as downfalls of virtual mobility, the latter being a mere matter of planning and organization that can be solved in the preparatory phase. The company sees the limitation of possible tasks for the intern as a downfall of virtual mobility. All sides seem to agree that the internship can be seen as an intercultural experience: the student mentions learning a lot about different SME's in Europe, the company states that the intercultural experience was made clear because of a somewhat different approach as well as different information sources. Although the student didn't feel very responsible towards the company, she felt absolutely as if she were part of it, because she was aware of the importance of her task. The company contradicts this by stating that the student couldn't possibly have been part of the company, because of the short time, the small task and because there was no need to cooperate with other employees except for two company supervisors. Whilst the project is attracting attention among students, unfortunately it does not really have the same impact among employers. It is still hard to encourage companies to participate in such an internship. WPBS estimates that more time is required for employers to absorb the advantages of a virtual internship. The student would advise a virtual internship to people who work full-time and want to gain a new experience, meet new people abroad, work with technology and improve their language skills. According to the company, for a virtual internship to be successful, it depends on the activities that can be assigned to the student. It would be necessary to insert these kinds of activities into a more general framework of development of international activities and mutual international internship exchanges.



Helping out a European Business Centre on Cyprus

West Pomeranian Business School, Poland
January - June 2011

Project description

One Polish student of Economic and Business organization participated in a fully virtual internship for Talos LTD, an independent business organisation from Cyprus, operating in the field of consultancy, research, project management. Learning goals for the student were gaining intercultural experience, putting knowledge into practice, gaining valuable work experience in her own field of study, successfully completing her tasks for the company, and improving language skills. The company proposed several projects to work on, of which the student chose the following: Aid in the regulation of the Business Centre Cyprus (BSC-Cy) within the framework of Enterprise Europe Network. Her concrete tasks were to help in the maintenance and update of an online tool, evaluate project proposals and expressions of interest, and promote the network via online platforms. In the preparatory phase, the project was promoted by the university and by an interested local radio station. To attract e-learning students, an online information session was organized by e-learning specialists and the HEI staff. It led to several applications. The university arranged face-to-face meetings with the selected student to plan the internship in further detail. The student had a Skype meeting with the company mentor to set up tasks, deadlines and targets. The student had already worked abroad and is very familiar with the e-learning system and different technologies used in distance learning. During the internship, communication was carried out via Skype, e-mail and chat tools. To show the importance of the work of the student, the promise was made to publish an article about her research in a local newspaper. Unfortunately, the company mentor didn't respond to mails or other messages after a couple of weeks. The internship had to be suspended.

Project evaluation

The pilot was expected to run smoothly and according to its initial plan. There were no major drawbacks recorded in the "preparatory and before phases". All stakeholders were sufficiently familiar with the project idea and its objectives. They were eager and looking forward to further cooperation. At the start of the internship, it was agreed that the first task would be completed and submitted back to the employer for assessment within a week. The student was also promised that the work would be published in a local newspaper, which increased her enthusiasm, certainty about the importance of the tasks. Problems began only a week after the start of the internship. Suddenly, after a very promising outset, the cooperation came to a standstill. The employer had failed to respond to the student's work numerous times. The HEI decided to intervene in order to resume the communication, but so far it has been to no avail. A new face-to-face meeting between the student and HEI was arranged, during which the student expressed her deep astonishment about the current situation, and stated, despite the occurred issues, her willingness to continue cooperation and hopefully complete the internship. The HEI will continue to re-encourage the employer to resume his participation in the pilot, so that the student will be satisfied and also be able to complete the study programme's compulsory internship according to schedule. It is rather difficult to assess what went wrong, and what the main reasons of such practices were from employer's side. Because of better results in another pilot, it is highly possible that this virtual internship will be offered on a permanent basis for future students. The only challenge that needs to be faced is the process of establishing strong networks of contacts between HEI and Business organizations. Commitment and engagement of all actors involved is also an absolute condition for success.

The EU-VIP pilot projects

Virtual mobility to support students before, during and after a 'traditional' internship

Pilot ref.	Actors	Which tools and why
Pilot 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 adult learners • 18 companies • Limited amount of university tutors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-portfolio → better student follow-up • Web conferencing → student mentoring by academic staff and better communication between three parties
Pilot 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 34 adult learners (distance education) • 34 organizations • Limited amount of academic support staff 	E-learning platform, web conferencing, e-mail and telephone → preparation of the internship and evaluative support by academic staff during the internship
Pilots 7 and 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 students abroad • Peers at home • Academic mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-assessment system and e-portfolio → student follow-up and stimulate student reflection • Web conferencing → feedback from academic mentor and peers
Pilot 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 bachelor students • One company mentor • Co-workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blogging → communication with and feedback from peers, mentors and co-workers about task / archive of the work done • Web conferencing → communication with and feedback from mentor at a distance
Pilot 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70 students • Academic support staff 	Virtual training environment (moodle with flash video applications, slides and a forum) to prepare students for an internship abroad
Pilot 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students from 3 degree programmes • Academic support staff 	Blackboard-based online placement environment (with integration of Skype, web conferencing, evaluation tool and personal pages) for support during, supervision and evaluation of international internships



overview

Virtual placements

Pilot ref.	Actors	Type of tasks	Interaction via
Pilot 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One bachelor student • One company mentor 	IT development	Student – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 face-to-face meetings • communication and feedback in between meetings mainly via e-mail
Pilot 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team of 5 bachelor students • One company 	Market analysis	Students – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communication and feedback mainly via e-mail
Pilot 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 bachelor students • One company • Academic mentor 	IT testing	Students – HEI: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • weekly face-to-face meetings Students – company- HEI: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-portfolio for student support and follow-up Students – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collaboration platforms for task performance and feedback • web conferencing to participate in team discussions
Pilots 6 and 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 mixed international student groups • 2 companies • Academic mentors of two HEI's 	Market analysis	Between the students and between the different stakeholders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited amount of face-to-face meetings • video and web conferencing • online document sharing tools • e-mail • social media (pilot 9)

The EU-VIP pilot projects

Virtual placements

Pilot ref.	Actors	Type of tasks	Interaction via
Pilot 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One master student • One organization • Academic support staff 	Research work and website development	Student – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • web conferencing • e-mail Student – HEI: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • web conferencing • e-mail
Pilot 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One student • One company • Multiple clients • One academic mentor 	IT testing and support	Student – HEI: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • weekly face-to-face meetings Student – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • daily virtual meetings Student – clients: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work at premises
Pilot 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three bachelor students • One company • Academic mentor 	Website development	Students – HEI – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • web conferencing • online learning diary Students – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail, Skype, collaboration web application, chat Students – HEI: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • face-to-face meetings
Pilot 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One master student • One organization • Academic mentor 	Setting up an e-learning platform	Student – HEI – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail, telephone and video conference to plan work placement • video conference for intermediary progress discussions Student – HEI: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail and face-to-face to discuss progress and stimulate reflection Student – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail and web conferencing to monitor progress and provide feedback



overview

Pilot ref.	Actors	Type of tasks	Interaction via
Pilot 17	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One master student• One organization• Academic mentor	Research work / compiling information / preparing slide shows	Student – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• selection via web conferencing• face-to-face orientation trip• collaboration via e-mail and web conferencing Student – HEI: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• face-to-face meetings twice a month
Pilot 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One adult student• One company• Academic mentor	Desktop research	Student – HEI: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• face-to-face meetings to plan and provide support during the internship Student – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• weekly web conferencing appointments• e-mail
Pilot 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One student• One company• Academic mentor	Website update / evaluating project proposals / promotional work	Student – HEI: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• face-to-face meetings to plan and provide support during the internship Student – company: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• web conferencing• e-mail• chat

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Editors

This manual was edited by:

- Wim Van Petegem (EuroPACE ivzw / K.U.Leuven)
- Mariet Vriens (K.U.Leuven)

Contributors

The following people contributed in one way or another to the content of the manual (in alphabetical order):

- Mart Achten (EuroPACE ivzw)
- Milton Aldrete (Laurea University)
- Bas Bergervoet (K.U.Leuven)
- Erica Bezzon (University of Padua)
- Anna Boaretto (University of Padua)
- Michelle Botha (EFMD)
- Salvator Caetano (BEST)
- Manuela Colin (University of Bologna)
- Hilde Evers (KHLeuven)
- Susy Gargiulo (University of Bologna)
- Esther Haag (University of Groningen)
- Sake Jager (University of Groningen)
- Anna-Kaarina Kairamo (Aalto University)
- Regitze Kristensen (Tietgen Business College)
- Marjaana Laurema (Aalto University)
- Britt Lindegaard (Tietgen Business College)
- Janne Loikkanen (University of Turku)
- Boriana Marinova (EFMD)
- Catarina Moleiro (Coimbra Group)
- Lieve Mulier (KHLeuven)
- Ilse Op de Beeck (EuroPACE ivzw)
- Ulla Rintala (Aalto University)
- Gilda Rota (University of Padua)
- Claudia Schrader (FernUniversität Hagen)
- Christophe Terrasse (EFMD)
- Kees-Jan van Dorp (EADTU)
- Wieke Villerius (BEST)
- Jacek Wojcik (West Pomeranian Business School)

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