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VIRTUAL MOBILITY: A FLEXIBLE APPROACH

International work placements are gaining increasing importance in the context of internationalisation of higher education and globalisation of our (professional) world. However, traditional international work placements are not always feasible for all students due to financial, geographical, social or other reasons. Can technology help to make such internships a reality?

ILSE OP DE BEECK, MARIET VRIENS, WIM VAN PETEGEM
KU Leuven, Belgium

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Virtual mobility, defined as 'a set of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) supported activities that realise or facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching and/or learning',¹ offers possibilities to address issues of immobility, providing greater potential for immobile students to experience work placements abroad in one form or another. Virtual mobility can be used to facilitate and support physical international internships (blended) or to realise international internships (virtual).

ACTORS INVOLVED IN INTERNATIONAL PLACEMENTS

Any work placement involves three stakeholders: the higher education institution, the student and the receiving company or organisation. 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/organisation. Virtual mobility can be implemented to facilitate this interaction at a distance. The implementation of ICT to support interaction can also range from very limited (when most of the interaction between two stakeholders takes place face-to-face) to very far-reaching (when all of the interaction between two stakeholders happens at a distance).

Looked at from a time perspective, three different phases in a work placement can be distinguished: before, during and after the placement. In each of the addressed phases one or more different actors are involved and virtual mobility activities can help to enable optimal communication between the different stakeholders. The possible integration of virtual mobility in international internships during the different phases has been assessed through a European project 'Enterprise-University Virtual Placements' (EU-VIP).² This initiative consisted of a variety of pilot projects conducted between 2009 and 2011, bringing together 16 partners from eight

different countries. Some of the examples and experiences of participants involved in the pilot projects are illustrated here to show the role technology can play in enabling mobility.

PREPARATIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PLACEMENT

In the 'before' phase of a placement, it is essential to plan all aspects thoroughly. Ideally, all of the agreements, responsibilities and procedures form part of a written agreement between all actors. Virtual mobility can be useful in this phase for example in organising a synchronous discussion between actors that are geographically widely dispersed, in order to select the right student, to introduce the student to the company and the culture of the 'hosting' country and *vice versa* to introduce the company to the culture of the student's home country, *etc.*

EXAMPLE: SKYPE

In a pilot project organised by the University of Turku in Finland, an offer for an international placement was made by the TURKU-Southwest Finland European Office located in Brussels, Belgium. To select the right student for the job the organisation used Skype interviews with the candidates. After the student selection, Skype was also used to make the first arrangements regarding the placement.

EXAMPLE: VIDEO CVs

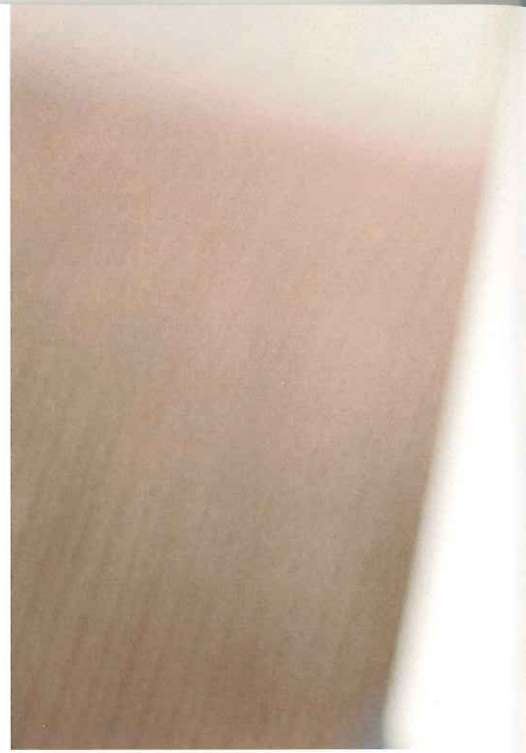
The University of Padua in Italy uses video CVs whereby students present themselves to foreign companies. The video CV has proven to be an effective way for students to introduce themselves to companies abroad, with a focus on demonstrating their communicative and linguistic skills. The video CVs are offered via an online platform which also provides a chat function through which remote interviews between the students and the interested companies can take place.

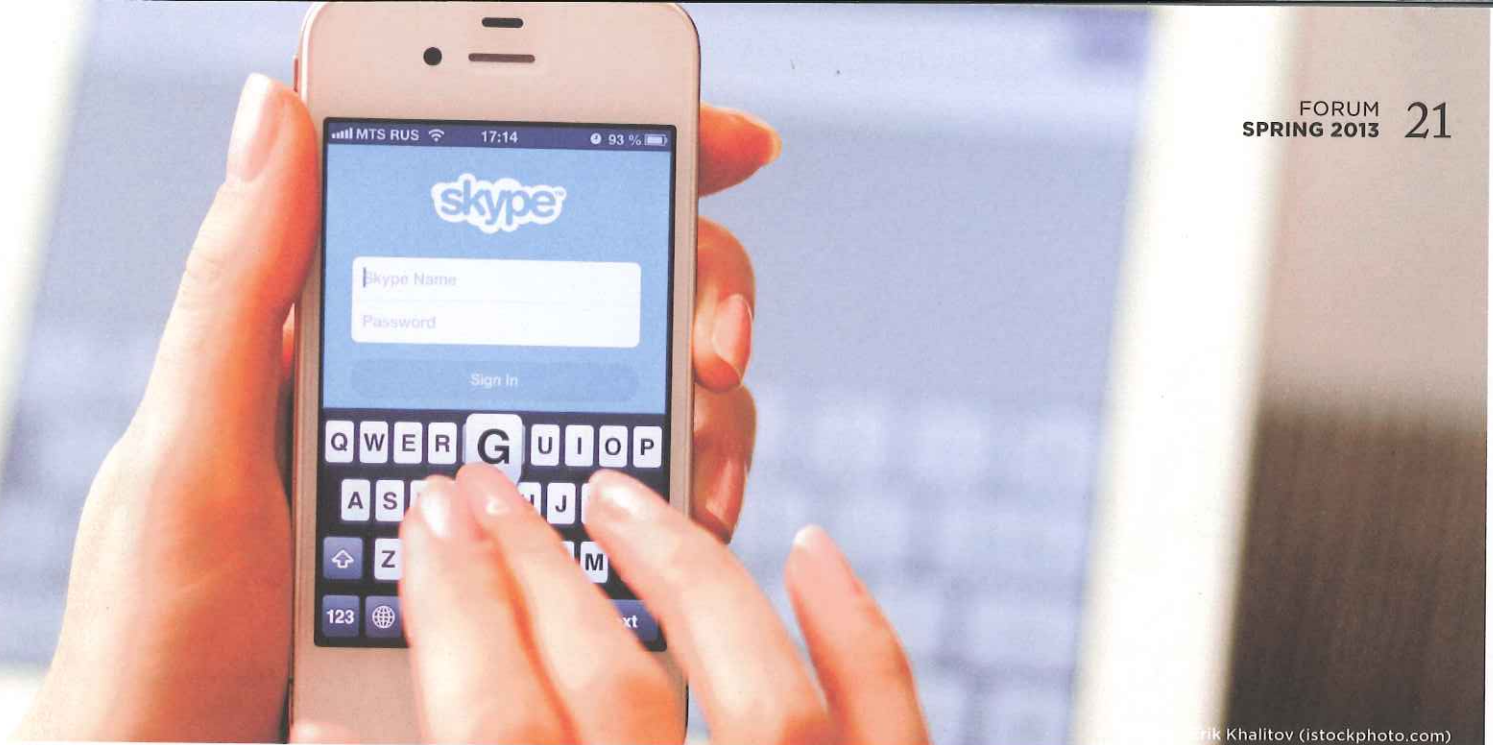
DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

During the placement the focus will obviously be on the development of knowledge and skills through practical and authentic tasks. Next to discipline-specific competencies, the student will also ideally have the opportunity to work on generic skills like teamwork, international, social and communication skills. To stimulate this learning process, coaching and feedback from academic and company mentors is essential. Virtual mobility can be used in this phase to execute tasks for a company at a distance, to mentor the student by academic or company staff, to organise peer feedback, or to stimulate student reflection (*eg* through use of a blog or an e-portfolio).

EXAMPLE: VIDEO CONFERENCING

The Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven in Belgium organised a pilot in which Business Studies students undertaking work placements abroad participated in a weekly seminar at their home institution through video conferencing. These seminars took place together with their peers at home and were aimed at exchanging experiences regarding local and international work placements. This way, the students at home had the opportunity to share the international experience. The students abroad were able to better reflect on the differences in business cultures. Additionally, the students also used an e-portfolio and an online self-assessment tool to monitor their own learning process.





Erik Khalitov (istockphoto.com)

EVALUATION OF A PLACEMENT

In the 'after' phase, evaluation is the central theme: evaluation of the student but also assessment of the cooperation between the higher education institution and the company/organisation. Virtual mobility can come in useful here to discuss student assessment or evaluation of the placement or to make a final assessment of the student's performance based on an archived use of collaboration or reflection tools.

EXAMPLE: E-PORTFOLIO

FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany developed a Moodle platform to support students undertaking a work placement in all phases. During the placement, the students keep track of their progress through the e-portfolio function. They also have the opportunity to communicate with peers through the discussion forum. This results in a detailed log of the work placement, accessible to all actors during and after the placement. The student uses this log to perform a self-assessment and the mentors can take it into account when deciding on the end evaluation and accreditation of the placement.

EXAMPLE: BLOGGING

In a fully virtual placement organised by KU Leuven in Belgium, the student's blog (which was used to report on his or her progress) was used to replace the normal paper report. The end evaluation was based on this report in combination with a Skype meeting between academic and company mentor.

CHALLENGES IN REACHING BUSINESSES

During the many EU-VIP pilot projects, the topic of virtual mobility and internships generated a lot of interest and enthusiasm among higher education institutions and students. However, the business stakeholder group turned out to be a lot more difficult to reach. It was determined that there was a clear need to enlarge the dissemination potential towards businesses. The EU-VIP project also noted that international work placements are mostly the result of individual relationships or actions. They are often made possible due to personal connections either from the student or someone at the institution, while for successful virtually supported placements a more structured implementation and collaboration between higher education institutions and companies is desirable.

IN A VIRTUAL PLACEMENT ORGANISED BY KU LEUVEN, THE STUDENT'S BLOG WAS USED TO REPLACE THE NORMAL PAPER REPORT

These issues are now being addressed in the follow-up project 'Promoting Virtual Mobility in Placements' (PROVIP) (2012–2014).³ This project is aimed at disseminating the EU-VIP and PROVIP results to business stakeholders. It also aims to create structured international cooperation regarding virtually supported international work placements between higher

education institutions and the business world, facilitated through a collaboration platform. Both projects hope to contribute to the realisation of mobility for all in the European higher education area. **E**

Those interested in the topic of virtual internships can find more information in the publication: *Make it work! Integrating virtual mobility in international work placements*, available as a free download on the project website: www.euvip.eu.

1. Vriens, M., Achten, M., Beeck, I. & Van Petegem, W., (2011). *Virtual mobility in international work placements*. www.euvip.eu/resources/EDEN_paper.pdf.
2. The EU-VIP was funded by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme. For more information, please visit: www.euvip.eu.
3. The progress of the PROVIP project can be followed via the website www.provip.info.