



## **PROVIP PROJECT**

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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. Traditional international work placements, where the learner travels to the company abroad, are not always feasible for all students due to financial, geographical, or social reasons. Virtual mobility, or ICT-supported interaction to realize international collaboration, offers possibilities to address these issues.

PRO-VIP is a two-year project, funded by the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme under Action Erasmus Multilateral Projects. The purpose of the project is to create more structural links between higher education institutions (HEIs) and businesses and to create a platform for facilitating and supporting virtual placements. The project has three primary stakeholders: businesses, HEIs and students.

### **Information for companies**

By offering a virtual international placement, the business will directly feel the advantage of being able to engage international interns in a virtual way (access to foreign markets; cost effectiveness; knowledge). Through a virtual placement, businesses can get access to students and HEIs they normally would not get acquainted with and it is a great choice when there are, for example, financial or geographical reasons that makes a 'physical' international placement difficult.

### **Why would we offer work placements to international students?**

- They can act as a bridge to foreign markets and networks
- Because of the need for native speakers
- Because of the need for very specific knowledge
- To experience other business cultures

- To bring in new ideas and perspectives

### **Why would we invest in integrating virtual mobility activities?**

- Continuous feedback from the HEI and/or peers will result in better task performance
- The placements can serve as ‘hotbeds’ for testing new collaboration methods as part of a larger evolution towards a globally integrated enterprise
- The placements can serve as recruitment instruments in the ‘war for talent’

### **Things to consider beforehand:**

- Are there tasks that a student (or a group of students) can perform through virtual mobility and that are at the same time of real importance to us?
- Are there any security issues to consider? Can we give access to our existing online communication channels?
- Can we make sure our staff is attributed the necessary time to undertake virtual mentoring?
- Does our staff have the necessary ICT-skills and experience with virtual communication? Do they understand the specific challenges of a virtual internship? Can we offer the necessary training if this is not the case?

### **Information for students**

Through a virtual international placement students will develop a wide range of international competencies during their study career and are therefore well prepared for working in a different country or within an international business. A virtual international placement is a perfect choice for students who wish to gain international experience but due to, for example, financial, geographical or social reasons are unable to go abroad.

### **Why would I undertake an international work placement?**

- Cross-border professional experience is becoming more important to future employers
- To gain intercultural competencies in a professional environment

### **Why would I be interested in integrating virtual mobility?**

- Increased possibilities for a flexible set-up of international placements (combination of study@home and work abroad)

- The possibility to undertake an international work placement at-a-distance
- The possibility to continuously interact with academic staff and/or peer students during a stay abroad
- The development of technology- and virtual communication skills

### **Things to consider beforehand:**

- When you undertake a (mainly) virtual internship, you will sometimes work in an isolated environment. To deal with this, you need to be able to work independently and plan and organize your work individually. You need to be confident enough to take initiatives and ask for help when necessary.
- Bringing a virtual internship to a good end presumes a highly motivated intern. Are you convinced that you can do it?
- Preferably you have some experience with virtual communication. If this is not the case, make sure you test and get to know the tools you will be using before your placement starts.

### **Information for higher education**

Through virtual international placements, HEIs will have the opportunity to realize goals of internationalization of the curriculum. By engaging in virtual international placements the institution can increase the number of students who will partake in an international placement and at the same time network with companies abroad.

### **Why would we organize international work placements?**

- to support and enable the internationalization of curriculums
- to provide extra opportunities for students
- to enlarge international attraction of the study programmes
- to stimulate knowledge exchange with the international professional field

### **Why would we invest in integrating virtual mobility activities?**

- to offer the student flexible opportunities to undertake an international placement
- to make international internships more accessible to all students
- to enhance the learning experience abroad through continuous mentoring and (peer) feedback
- to enhance quality control of international work placements

### **Things to consider beforehand:**

- Before offering your students the opportunity to undertake a virtual internship, make sure you are clear about: which learning outcomes do we expect from the internship and can they be reached through virtual mobility activities? Are our students ready for such an enterprise? (Can they plan their work and learning process independently? Are they really motivated?)
- Do our students and our staff have the necessary technology at their disposal? Can we make sure our staff is attributed the necessary time to uptake virtual mentoring? Do our staff and students have the necessary ICT-skills and experience with virtual communication?
- Do they understand the specific challenges of a virtual internship? Can we offer the necessary training if this is not the case?

## **The phases of the placement**

### **Before the work placement**

#### **Virtual mobility can come in useful here to:**

- organize a synchronous discussion between actors that are geographically widely dispersed
- select the right student
- introduce the student to the company & the culture of the “hosting” country
- introduce the company to the culture of the student’s home country
- offer preparatory training

### **During the placement**

#### **Virtual mobility can come in useful here to:**

- execute tasks for a company at a distance
- student mentoring by academic or company staff
- organize peer feedback
- stimulate student reflection  
(e.g. through use of a blog or an e-portfolio)

### **After the placement**

#### **Virtual mobility can come in useful here to:**

- discuss student assessment or evaluation

of the placement

- make a final assessment of the student's performance based on an archived use of collaboration or reflection tools

### Conditions for succes

#### **Preferred student characteristics**

- Mature and being able to plan and organize his/her own learning process
- Experience with virtual communication
- Highly motivated

#### **Qualitative e-coaching**

- Clear agreements about the goals of coaching and the roles of the different coaches
- Following an established communication protocol. Such a protocol states (for example): when the different actors are available; when reporting is required; when feedback can be expected etc.

#### **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 (e.g. web and video conferencing)

- 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