

CHAPTER X

VIRTUAL MOBILITY IN INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIPS

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In this chapter we look at the opportunities virtual mobility - or ICT supported activities that facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching and/or learning - can offer when used to support international internships. The main reasons for exploring the possibility of virtual or blended internships are the chances it creates for the physically less mobile student, but the concept can also hold an added value for higher education institutions and companies. Nevertheless, the integration of virtual mobility in international internships is not self-evident. There are some important conditions for success to take into consideration: selecting the “right” students, establishing a communication protocol, choosing suitable tasks, integrating the “human” factor etc. This chapter is based on the findings of the European project “Enterprise - University Virtual Placements” (EU-VIP) and also introduces the outcomes of the follow-up project “Promoting Virtual Placements” (PROVIP).

International internships are becoming more and more important in our 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 future work force possesses the right intercultural and digital skills to deal with the opportunities of this global economy.

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 our current professional world. The European 2020 strategy¹ considers stronger links between universities and businesses to be essential for Europe to be able to evolve into a true knowledge based economy.

For financial, geographical or social reasons it is however not possible for all students to undertake an international internship. Introducing virtual mobility in international internships can be one way to address this issue.

Definitions

We define virtual mobility as a set of ICT supported activities that realize or facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching and/or learning. We introduce it here as an additional way of teaching and/or learning in an international context, not as a substitute for physical mobility. Both types of learning mobility have their own merits and disadvantages that should be taken into account.

Internships do exist in many different shapes and sizes. In the context of this chapter we focus on those internships that are offered and undertaken within the framework of formal tertiary education, as part of a curriculum. This type of internship involves three stakeholders: the higher education institution, the student and the receiving company or organization. During an

¹ See Reference [1]

internship 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 or organization. Virtual mobility can be implemented to facilitate this interaction at a distance. This way it is possible for a student to undertake an internship while not (always) being at the company's premises. We can make a distinction between a "blended" internship where the student is present at the company from time to time and a fully "virtual" internship where all interaction and collaboration between student and company happens at a distance.

Finally, when we talk about an internship, we always take into consideration three different phases: the "before" phase when all necessary arrangements are made to ensure a successful internship, the "during" phase when the focus will be on the development of skills and knowledge through practical and authentic tasks and the "after" phase when the three parties involved evaluate the internship.

Why: the benefits of virtual or blended internships

As can be deduced from our introduction the concept of blended or virtual internships has initially been explored from the perspective of the (less physically mobile) student and the advantages it can bring for this target group. It allows them to develop cross-border professional experience and intercultural competencies while staying (partly) at home. Moreover, it fits perfectly into the current economic reality where online collaboration and telework are becoming more and more important.

But also for higher education institutions the introduction of blended and virtual internships can have significant advantages. It can support and broaden the implementation of existing internationalisation strategies and enlarge the attraction of study programmes. Next to this, it can stimulate the knowledge exchange with the international professional field.

For companies virtual or blended internships can mean a cost-effective access to new specialized knowledge, foreign markets and native speakers. It also allows them to explore the trend of telework further.

Conditions for success

However, a successful implementation of virtual mobility in international internships is not self-evident. Especially in case of fully virtual internships there are a lot of aspects and conditions to consider².

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND MOTIVATION

Not every student will be able to undertake a blended or virtual internship. 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 internship 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 internships are adult learners, who would also benefit most from this flexible opportunity to undertake an international internship.

Students preferably already possess the necessary ICT skills and have previous experience with virtual mobility activities.

In general, motivation seems to be one of the major reasons why internships succeed or fail in their learning objectives³. 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. One very important factor here is the quality of the tasks that are assigned to the student: even though the student is not physically present, the tasks need to be

² Based on the manual published in the framework of the EU-VIP project. See reference [2]

³ See reference [3]

authentic and must be part of real projects addressed to satisfy real needs of the enterprise.

COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL

To ensure a smooth ICT-supported interaction between student and company or organisation, it is necessary to draw up a communication protocol. Such a protocol can state: when the different parties 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. A good protocol will help to establish a feeling of availability and help to avoid feelings of isolation.

THE INTERNSHIP MODEL

Internships exist in many shapes and sizes. Not all types of internships 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.

Internships can also differ as far as the general goal is concerned. They can be aimed mainly at discovery (short work experiences), specialization and 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.

THE “HUMAN” FACTOR

Face-to-face contact between the company and the student at some point in time (e.g. at the start) is almost always beneficial to the success of the internship. If this is not an option

though, it is possible to reduce the risk of feelings of isolation or distrust by choosing 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) and by creating space for non-task-related communication. (E.g. talk about other projects of the company, the news, social events, etc.)

ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION

The overall design of the internship 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 experience we need to pay attention to this point. 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 internship, organizational socialization is even more difficult to realize. What is important here is to 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.

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 identity⁴. An international internship of course provides an excellent opportunity to work on these skills in a professional environment. However, the development of these types 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.

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 of 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.

⁴ 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 reference [4]

- Focus on differences in written communication, negotiation styles, business cultures, decision making processes (e.g.: formal vs. informal communication, importance of hierarchy etc.)
- 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.

Project background: research and consolidation of findings

The findings above are the result of the EU-VIP project (<http://www.euvip.eu>). EU-VIP stands for Enterprise-University Virtual Placements. The project looked into the possibilities virtual mobility can offer in the area of international internships. EU-VIP ran from October 2009 until September 2011. The project brought together 16 partners from 8 different countries.

Firstly, the project established a state-of-the-art report regarding virtual and blended internships. Starting from this document and additional research, the partnership put together a scenario for organizing virtual and blended internships. This scenario served as a general framework to design and implement 19 pilot projects.

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.

In October 2012 the EU-VIP project was followed up by a new European project, called PROVIP (www.provip.eu). PROVIP

stands for Promoting Virtual Placements and runs until October 2014. The project joins 14 European partners.

On the one hand, PROVIP aims at disseminating the results of EU-VIP further. On the other hand the project looks at the possibility of consolidating these findings through the development of an ICT-tool. The project started from the assumption that some of the most important success factors for virtual or blended internships could be realized more easily if they were supported through an online environment:

- making clear agreements beforehand about goals and roles,
- establishing a communication protocol,
- avoiding a strict one-on-one setting,
- good student follow-up in order to avoid isolation.

This was the basis for the development of the Pathway platform. Pathway is an innovative tool for supporting and facilitating international internships at-a-distance. It aims to support the virtual internship process during the three different phases (before, during and after) and involves the three different stakeholder groups during this entire process. The main features of the platform are:

- it supports matchmaking between students and companies,
- it supports the creation of an internship charter (including a communication protocol),
- it enables a close follow-up of interns from a distance,
- it supports online communication and collaboration,
- it provides just-in-time guidelines and advice about the organization of virtual internships.

The tool was tested through a pilot project by students, study programmes and companies in the field of marketing and ICT. It is available online and can be used free of charge. There is also a possibility to download and use the open source software. This way it can be customized and hosted on other servers. The tool and more information are available via the PROVIP website.

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In conclusion we can state that blended and virtual international internships are a valid addition to “traditional” international internships. The concept does open up new possibilities for students who are not able to travel abroad. There are nevertheless some important conditions for success that need to be fulfilled and that require a lot of planning and preparation. Therefore virtual and blended internships are preferably not organised as one-shot-initiatives, but should be part of a sustainable internship programme. Such a structural implementation of virtual and blended internships, as part of a sustainable internship programme, will also help to gain general acknowledgement of and support for this type of internship. Another way to realize a consolidation of the ideas about virtual mobility in international internships is a structural support for internships from a distance, provided by online tools such as the Pathway tool which was introduced in this chapter.

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