EXPERIENCES OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP IN EUROPE

How can virtual internships ensure meaningful work-based learning experiences?

ON-IT
ONLINE INTERNSHIP IN TOURISM

uniMC
UNIVERSITÀ DI MACERATA
l'umanesimo che innova

Universidad de La Laguna

jamk | University of Applied Sciences

UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA
FACULTY OF TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT
OPATIJA, CROATIA

MBS since 1897

unimed

IGCAT
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF GASTRONOMY, CULTURE, ARTS AND TOURISM

Editors

Federica De Giorgi, Cristina Stefanelli | UNIMED - Mediterranean Universities Union, Italy

Contributors

Chiara Aleffi, Gigliola Paviotti | Università degli Studi di Macerata, Italy

Natalia Antonova, Francisco Javier García Rodríquez, Desiderio Gutierrez Taño, José Alberto Martínez González, Inés Ruiz de la Rosa | Universidad of La Laguna, Spain

Francesca Allievi | JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Finland

Elsa Kassardjian | Montpellier Business School, France

Ivana Ivančić | University of Rijeka, Croatia

Federica De Giorgi, Cristina Stefanelli | UNIMED - Mediterranean Universities Union, Italy

Fabrizia Toccoli | IGCAT - International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism, Spain

Disclaimer

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

More information on the ON-IT project can be found at: www.on-it.info

Table of contents

1. About ON-IT and this report

Overview of the project

ON-IT "Online Internship in Europe" focuses on the development of guidelines and resources to design and implement meaningful remote internships in higher education. Starting from both a mapping of experiences from EU institutions and a review of present guidelines for a quality internship, the consortium will work on drafting and testing of remote work-based learning pathways. The outputs will seek to cover the overall system that allows work-based learning, including advice on admin procedures. Together with guidance tools, tutorials and guidelines for teachers, tutors (of both sending/receiving institutions), other university staff, and of course students, the project also intends to develop learning materials for all the involved targets. Learning materials will be addressed to work-based learning and employability. The project aims to focus also on skills development for remote working, to provide students with further employability skills to increase their professional success in a labour market shaped by digital transformation. As piloting action, ON-IT focuses on the tourism field and aims at providing outputs easily transferable to all fields.

The project is implemented by a consortium composed by Università degli Studi di Macerata, Italy (coordinator); Universidad of La Laguna, Spain; JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Finland; Montpellier Business School, France; University of Rijeka, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Croatia; UNIMED - Mediterranean Universities Union, Italy; IGCAT – International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism, Spain.

ON-IT is co-funded by the Erasmus Plus programme of the European Union under Key Action: Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices – KA226-Partnership for Digital Education Readiness during the period March 2021-February 2023.

Introduction to the mapping exercise

The emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic has made evident that, while other types of online learning were already established and effective, remote internships/traineeships were not common and have been boosted by the COVID-19 emergency. To explore this, we have conducted a mapping exercise to understand the arrangements and the solutions implemented by universities in Europe and beyond for virtual internship and traineeship, with the aim to inspire other universities to run these activities effectively and inclusively, and to inform the next steps of the ON-IT project.

Methodology

The methodology used to collect the case study information was that of descriptive case study involving detailed, in-depth data collection through an online survey and detailed data collection through semi-structured interviews. 145 experiences of online internship have been collected through the survey, and 23 have been further analysed through semi-structured interviews.

2. Data analysis

During May 2021, the ON-IT project partnership launched a survey to map experiences of virtual internships in Europe with the aim to understand the arrangements and the solutions implemented by universities for virtual internship and traineeship. The survey targeted:

- University teachers or tutors who supervise virtual internships
- University students who experienced a virtual internship
- Internship office or career centre of universities offering virtual internships
- Company tutors working in organisations hosting virtual internships.

The responses of four different categories were then analysed, that of company tutors, teachers, career centres and students. The most representative category is precisely the latter, indeed the responses settle at 34.5% of the total, followed by that of company tutors at 29.0%, teachers at 22.1% and career centres at 14.5%.

As can be seen from the table, the respondents to the survey come from 14 different countries, with a particularly large participation from Italy, Croatia and Spain. Although the other countries are not as representative, the average of respondents for the other countries is indeed in the range of 1-4, it is interesting to note that many key aspects related to the virtual internship in Europe follow general trends. On the other hand, as regards the representation of the categories, the participation of students and company tutors in the survey doubled that of teachers and career centres.

Respondents	Teacher	Student	Company Tutor	Career centre	Total
Belgium				1	1
Croatia	1	11	3	2	17
Finland	2	3	1		6
France	1	1		1	3
Germany		1	2		3
Ireland				1	1

Italy	20	21	29	14	84
Kenya			1		1
Mexico	1				1
Montenegro			1		1
Netherlands		2			2
Portugal	2	1		1	4
Senegal		1			1
Spain	5	9	5	1	20
Total	**32**	**50**	**42**	**21**	**145**

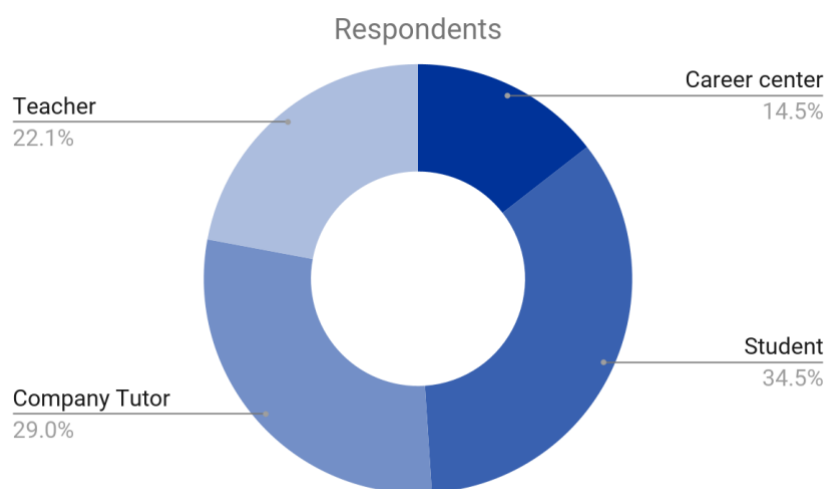*Figure 1.: Distribution of respondents per country*

Figure 2.: Distribution of respondents per target group

The vast majority of respondents (86,9%) had never organised or participated in a virtual internship experience before the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, only about one-tenth of the survey participants said virtual experience was a common practice even before the pandemic.
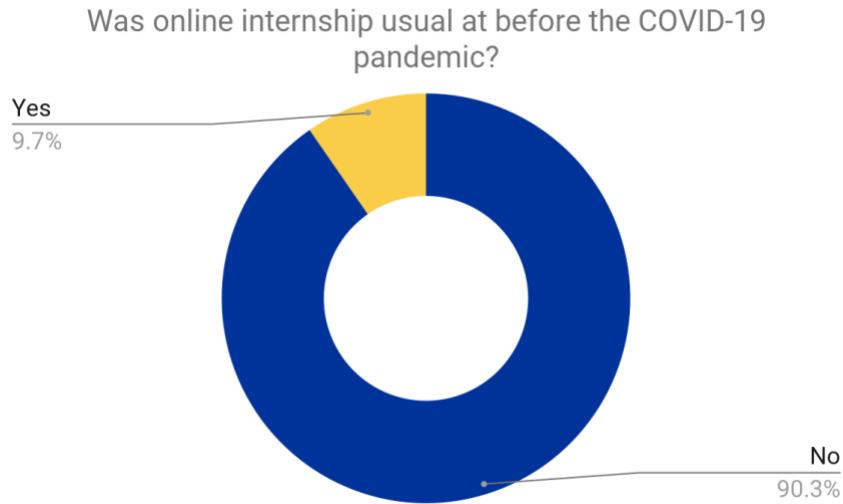
Was online internship usual at before the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes
9.7%

No
90.3%

Figure 4.: Internships offer before COVID-19

Online internship conducted during the COVID-19
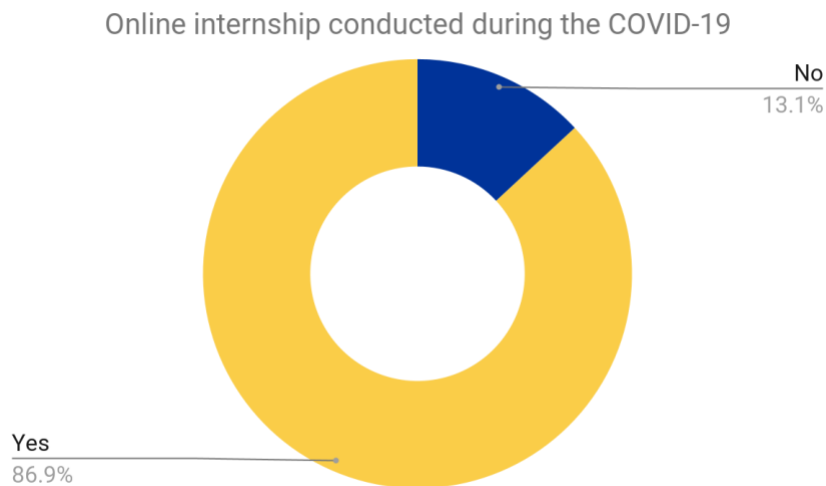
No
13.1%

Yes
86.9%

Figure 3.: Internships offer during COVID-19

Equally relevant is the effect that the pandemic has brought across Europe. Not only economic crisis and social distancing, but also a huge spread of virtual internships to cope with the emergency. In fact, more than 90% of respondents said they had organised or participated in online internships during the pandemic.

The pandemic has significantly accelerated the activation of online internships, also because there was no valid alternative, although this incredible acceleration did not allow universities to be adequately ready in terms of procedures even in Europe.

Not surprisingly, most of the respondents replied that they had not activated or had not had the opportunity to benefit from alternative procedures. Indeed, on average, less than one third of the participants declare that they have activated them or have benefited from them.

In these few cases, the alternative procedures concerned some amendments to the contract, safety regulations and protocols in the company, and specific regulations of students duties and tasks.

Specific procedures
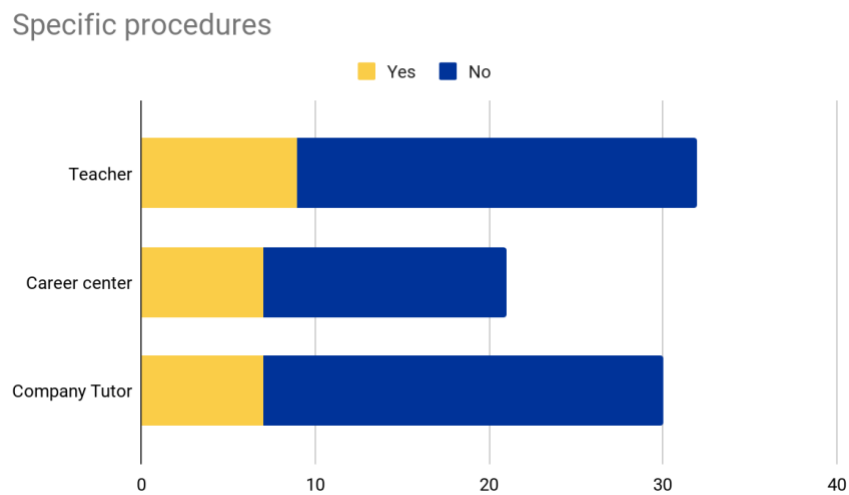
Figure 5.: Specific procedures per target group

Another relevant data concerns the alternative learning that may have been initiated during the virtual internship period. It is interesting to note that the results differ according to the category of respondents. While in fact less than a third of students claim to have benefited from it, more than half of teachers and career centres declare instead that they have activated the alternative learning process. In these affirmative cases, the alternative learning concerns seminars, workshops, training and courses focused on competencies and skills required to access the labour market.

Alternative learning

Figure 6.: Alternative learning per target group

3. An overview of the cases

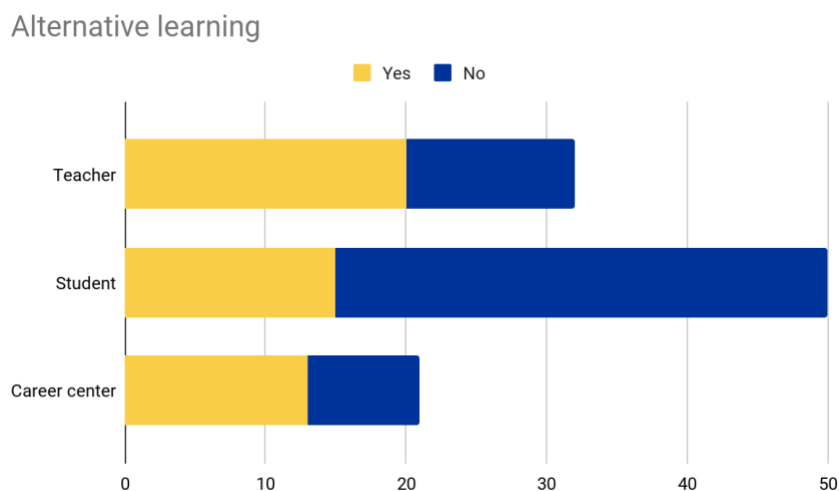The distributed 23 case-studies targeted University teachers supervising virtual internship (5), students having completed online internship (9), internship office or career centre administrators of the same universities (4) and company tutors or supervisors in charge of hosting the trainees (5).

Against the backdrop of the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic, online internships were outlined as a meaningful alternative to on-site training activities postponed to a later date. Online internships were thus conceived as an opportunity for a big cohort of students, generally enrolled in their third year of B.A. or in the successive two years of M.A., to gain professional experience as their peers of previous years despite the strict restrictions due to the pandemic, particularly hindering international travels. Remote internships/traineeships were hence envisioned as the single alternative to a dangerous deadlock that could have entailed a two-years postponement of students' lives and careers, causing great collective damage to the University as a community by disrupting its activities and students' life plans. However, remote internships had to be thought of anew and from scratch, as they had never been implemented on such a major and structural scale before. The universities launching online internship pilot projects and catering them to their students had therefore to venture on a slippery slope, where no previous similar experiences could be recounted. Like all pilot projects, the first implementation of this online internships' programme ought to be fully evaluated taking duly into account its pros and cons to incorporate constructive criticism, highlight positive recommendations made by participants and fine-tune the whole programme before putting it forward again for successive editions.

Virtual internships have been a novelty for both University teaching staff and personnel and their students. Their average lengths have been ranging between three (in Spain) to five months (in Finland) covering several fixed hours (approximately ranging between 120 and 300 work hours) previously agreed upon by the University tutor and the company of reference in a training agreement signed by both parties and shared with the assigned student. It stands out that the 120 hours-trainee is not considered effective by company tutors, who lament a too great investment by the company in each trainee's professional training against too little time to see tangible progress.

Some Universities, such as those in Italy, offered two different options for internships: A 'traditional' internship to be carried out in a company or by an external organisation and an in-house internal research internship to be carried out at the labs and research centres of the University of origin. A handful of universities, particularly in Spain, decided to split the internship requirement into two units to be completed independently from each other, with one unit lasting a month and a half consisting in a virtual internship (Senda Ecoway) and a

second unit of the same time length consisting of the attendance to an online course provided by the same university.

Theoretically, the virtual internship's training agreement should carefully list the objectives of the training and the assignments conferred to the student, but some University tutors admitted the listing of tasks not being exhaustive enough. Thus, a boosted effort should be made to draft training agreements as comprehensive and detailed as possible to provide both students and companies with clear guidance from the University of the results expected to be achieved through the internship experience. This turns out to be particularly relevant in virtual internships where person-to-person interaction is limited, informal negotiations among parties take less place and hence the workload should be clearly spelled out and arranged in advance.

The University of origin acts on a double track and on a two-step procedure: first, it is involved with its internship office to perform preliminary administrative tasks, such as the internship advertising and activation at the beginning of the process, as much the credits recognition once it completed; second, with the appointment of a university tutor or supervisor of each internship being activated, whose role covers both educational and organisational aspects. University supervisors have a key role to play: they should ensure the preliminary explanation of the internship goals and requirements to students as much as periodical and continuous contacts with them throughout the whole experience. The scheduling and frequency of these meetings is freely referred to each supervisor, with some of them managing to plan weekly meetings to check students' progresses and others even setting up daily follow-ups after the work time. To that end, some tutors on the company side lamented too little involvement of university supervisors in the process, both at the beginning, in the preliminary phase supposed to outline the statutory requirements and expected duties to students', and during the implementation phase. It has been stressed that virtual internships required additional self-motivation by students to keep their initial engagement and that university supervisors should be called into action in case of progressive student's intellectual disaffection or practical disengagement with their internship's duties. Indeed, some university supervisors also report students' potential isolation during virtual internships as a serious challenge to tackle. This reaction stems from the lack of belonging and disconnection from the work environment experienced by students confronted with their first work experience in a virtual space lacking or preventing meaningful sources of interactions, such as getting to know their colleagues and managers or getting acquainted with the office environment at least once.

Virtual internships made possible keeping alive international interaction and cooperation at dire times such as the current year, where little or no physical contact could occur in-between EU countries and even less between Europe and extra-European countries. To make an example, the virtual internship format jointly arranged by the University of La Laguna and the NGO la Casa de Africa in Guinea Bissau is a shining example of the possibility of overcoming

physical barriers by virtue of technological and major organisational change. All activities requiring travelling and moving over difficult borders had been transferred online to the benefits of both students and Universities upholding the principle of international cooperation. Hence, virtual internships carried out in an international context are widely approved by both companies' and universities' tutors, pointing out their high flexibility, the opportunity of connecting people in broader and further networks than those available on traditional on-site internships' destinations, and the little technical and financial costs involved. However, they raise some specific concerns from the students' perspective, as they could present for them the double challenge of entering and being daily confronted with a new culture without the opportunity to be physically and culturally surrounded by it, thus feeding into a cultural disconnection of the subject with his/her work environment. Tutors, though, consider international virtual internships pros to widely outweigh the cons. They underline that, given the structural lack of funds by universities and the high costs involved in pre-COVID on-site international internships, these same costs were only partially supported and covered by university grants with the result of limiting the number of students potentially applying for this opportunity. On the other hand, international virtual internships could be potentially made available and open to all students, providing a more equal and universal alternative to gain meaningful work experience in an international environment for students coming from all walks of life, thus acting as an equalizer factor. However, as international virtual internships are still conducted on a pilot basis, some tutors point out as they are not yet entitled to benefit from the same financial provisions of on-site internships, thus being so far exempted from the receival of any financial grant due to the missed extension to them of the same legal provisions regulating physical internships.

Finally, students' criticism mainly targets virtual internships' underrating by both companies and universities compared to physical ones, despite the comparable and non negligeable effort involved in conducting a virtual internship spanning over many hours a day, subject to a number of online meetings and activities requiring much attention and self-discipline, besides soliciting a much tighter time management by the student involved. Students convene with their tutors that research or special internship are better done in remote than in person and that all activities requiring only individual work (literature reviews, data elaboration on given softwares) could be better carried out virtually also in the next future, whereas those involving interaction with other departments, colleagues or clients should rather implement a blended approach. Also, students complain about being forced to rely on their own means to perform work, thus exploiting their own PC and phone for work calls and communication, with little or no investment by either the company or the university in providing them with adequate work tools. This feature could also turn out to be discriminatory in the long run, as lower-middle class background students may not dispose of their own computer or of a fairly-good internet connection enough to be able to work.

4. Conclusions and way(s) forward

This section includes recommendations aimed at achieving better synergies among all actors involved in the online internship experience: students, university administrative staff, university tutors, and company tutors.

Virtual internships offer the great potential of facilitating students to carry them out in an international context, without the need for excessive technical and financial resources. This experience also shows the potential of developing the online format of internships, linking them with third sector entities in general and specifically with international NGOs. Therefore, online internships constitute a great opportunity for the internationalisation of higher education institutions and for improving their contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Working on creating and promoting an international market can allow various interested social institutions to offer internships so that the universities can establish agreements and facilitate their students to participate in them. Once such a mechanism was proposed, the virtual format of the internships would allow their impact to increase to unprecedented levels. Also, one of the opportunities for online internships is to have international students from Europe, especially for a company dedicated to tourism.

One of the recommendations for universities includes improving the information about companies offering internships for students. It is better to start establishing the relationship between students and companies from the first year of the degree. It would be helpful to establish a list of companies that students could get to know gradually, including the activities they carry out, the location, etc., so that, a posteriori, the process of choosing the company was more directed to the students' needs for their internships. Limiting the information to the first semester of the fourth year of degree creates a feeling of overwhelm and of not being able to handle this amount of information.

The excessive paperwork and short deadlines for companies to carry out the internships is another point to improve. Companies are willing to host people, but the process must be made easier for them. So far, the procedure to host students in internships is considered too complicated.

For the university, very rigorous supervision of virtual internships is recommended, the hours of working should be registered, it should be made clear that the student has the right to rest for 2 days a week and work no longer than 6 hours a day. The university tutor has to ensure that there is an agreement between the student and the company regarding the schedule, and in general, the university tutors should be more present and show the company that the university cares about the student.

To improve communication between company/university tutors and students, it is better to schedule regular online meetings, for example, 1-2 times a week.

Also, university teachers/tutors who support students in finding a place for an internship, should pass the CV of the student to the company tutor before the internship so companies have an idea about the student's profile. Although students usually do not have much experience, at least the company will know what courses the student has taken and what are their interests.

Furthermore, a detailed internship plan should be developed alongside the formative plan, with description of tasks that the intern will carry out before the internship starts and not while it is in progress. This would help both the student and the company to know what to expect and avoid repetitive tasks. Company tutors should systemise the internship in a clear way by analysing students' tasks.

Another point to improve is the necessity of proper equipment to carry out internal internships. Companies as much as possible should improve their internet connection, and provide materials and equipment for students; it is a basic element to ensure that the internships go well.

Virtual internships demand from students specific personal competencies, which are the ability to plan, self-organisation, predisposition, and attitude, since the control is less direct working from home. Working more autonomously can lead to greater problems in adapting to the proper management of tasks. It is recommended for students to establish a specific place and a schedule, as well as an appropriate wardrobe, so as not to fall into distractions. For a good adaptation to the online part, it is necessary to have good planning skills, to know to identify doubts and to ask the company tutor about them. It could be useful to have an organised agenda, and having the tasks written down on the calendar.

This report presents the results of the mapping activity of virtual internship experiences provided by EU universities during COVID-19 pandemic.

This report is essential reading for all the actors involved in the online internship experience: students, university administrative staff, university tutors, company tutors, and anyone interested in advancing in the design and implementation of meaningful online internships in higher education.

ON-IT
ONLINE INTERNSHIP IN TOURISM