

Make it work!

A quick guide to integrate virtual mobility
in international work placements






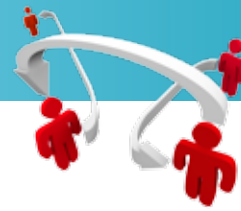
What?

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.

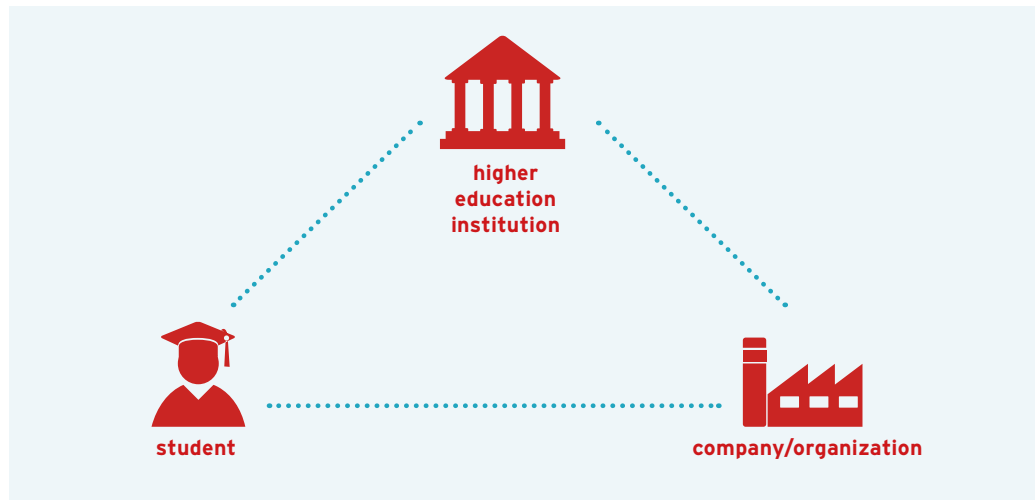
Traditional international work placements, where the learner travels to the company abroad, are not always feasible for all students because of financial, geographical, social or other reasons. For those physical placements abroad that do happen, there are also a number of difficulties to overcome, mainly related to a lack of communication between the student, the foreign company and the institution for higher education.

Virtual mobility, or ICT-supported interaction to realize international collaboration, offers possibilities to address these issues. This quick guide gives an introduction on how virtual mobility can support or even enable international work placements.

This guide addresses **the three stakeholders** that are involved in an international work placement: the higher education institution , the student  and the receiving company or organization . **Virtual mobility activities can be implemented to facilitate interaction between these stakeholders:** between the HEI and the company, between the student and the HEI, between the student and the company.



All these lines of interaction can consist of a combination of face-to-face and ICT-supported communication, of strictly face-to-face communication or of strictly ICT-supported communication. When the interaction between student and company is mainly ICT-supported, we talk about a virtual placement.



Why?



As a student:

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?

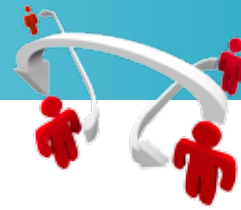
- increased possibilities for a flexible set-up of international placements (combination of study@home and work abroad)
- the possibility to undertake an international work placement at-a-distance
- the possibility to continuously interact with academic staff and/or peer students during a stay abroad
- the development of technology and virtual communication skills



As a company or organization:

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'

As a higher education institution:

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

**Is an ICT-supported placement something for me or my organization?
Things to consider before you embark on a virtual adventure...**



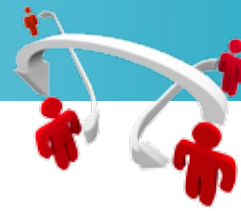
As a student

- 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. Is this something you are really convinced of being able to do?
- 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.



As a company or organization

- 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?

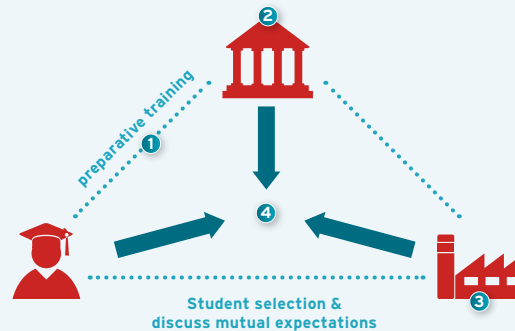
As a higher education institution

- 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?

In case of a (mainly) virtual internship, placements that are spread over a longer period in time and that allow a flexible work organization are the most suitable. Virtual interns are also preferably hired in the framework of a defined company project. To make such an internship a success, the involvement and commitment of all actors is absolutely essential.

The phases of an internship

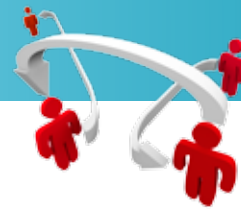
01 | Before the work placement



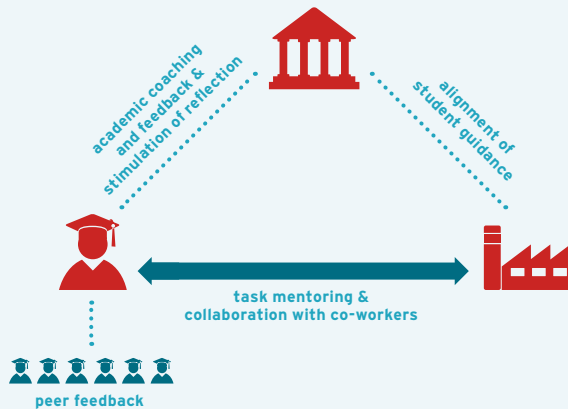
- 1 If necessary: preparation regarding cultural, social, linguistic or technical matters
- 2 Set-up a student 'helpdesk'
- 3 Set-up 'helpdesk' for company staff
Foresee additional training if necessary
- 4 Define an internship agreement including:
 - Learning outcomes
 - Evaluation procedure and criteria
 - Tasks to be performed, deadlines to be met
 - Communication protocol
 - Roles and responsibilities of all actors
 - Choice of technology that will be used

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
- ...



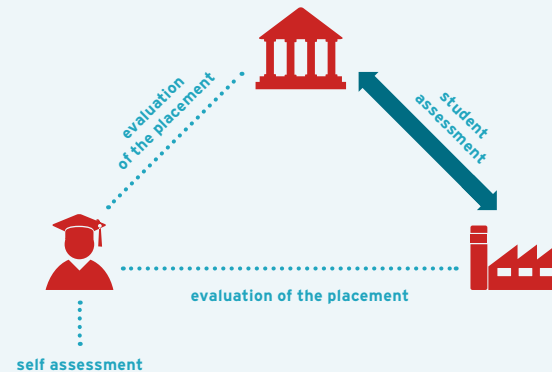
02 | During the placement



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)
- ...

03 | 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 success

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

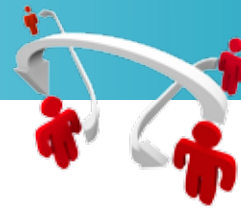
- Clear agreements about the goals of coaching and the roles of the different coaches
- Following an established communication protocol. Such a protocol states (for example): when the different actors are available; when reporting is required; when feedback can be expected etc

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

This quick guide is one of the results of the EU-VIP project which ran from October 2009 until September 2011. It is a summary of a more extensive publication with the same title. The publication provides a lot of inspiring examples of (partially) virtual work placements.

This quick guide is also available in Danish, Dutch, Finnish, German, Italian and Polish. The other language versions and the full publication can be downloaded via the website www.euvip.eu.

The EU-VIP project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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