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VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS FOR INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES



**GUIDLINE
FOR INITIALIZING
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS
IN ITALY**



National Youth Council
of Macedonia



GUIDELINES ON VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS IN ITALY

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About the project

The main goal of the **Virtual Internships for Inclusive Societies (VI4IS)** project is to improve access of young people, particularly those with fewer opportunities, to internship programs conducted within formal and non-formal education in Europe. The project contributes to ensuring equal opportunities for all young people to develop the necessary skills and gain practical experience in order to smoothen the transition from education to the labor market and ensure that all young people have access to adequately funded non-formal education at all levels .

The main activities of the project are: broad consultation process on country level, assessment of virtual internships, exchange of knowledge and good practices, both country-based and transnational (national and EU level, between EU and non-EU countries), piloting new and improving existing virtual internships programs across Europe.

The **Virtual Internships for Inclusive Societies (VI4IS)** project is funded by the EU.

Partnerships

BELGRADE OPEN SCHOOL

Belgrade Open School (BOS) is a non-profit civil society educational organization founded in 1993. BOS promotes and networks change makers, improves public policies and brings together the public, business and civil sectors to build a resilient society, based on knowledge, partnership and responsibility.

The BOS has solid experience in implementing projects for and by young people. Under the Employability and Career Guidance and Counseling program area, the BOS has implemented more than 40 national and international projects focusing on career guidance and counseling and has reached more than 30,000 young people, 50 youth offices, 80 schools and more than 300 teachers.

Since 2003, the BOS has encouraged the continuous development of the individual, lifelong learning and the general economic development of our society, contributing to the creation of a system of career guidance and counseling and strengthening the link between education and the labor market .

JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT EUROPE

Junior Achievement Europe is Europe's largest non-profit organization leading entrepreneurship, job readiness and financial health programs for young people, dedicated to inspiring and preparing young people for success and a member of JA Worldwide. For over 100 years, JA Worldwide

has offered hands-on, experiential learning in entrepreneurship, career readiness and financial health. In the last school year, the JA Europe network provided more than 6.6 million online, in-person and blended learning experiences to young people.

JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT SERBIA

Junior Achievement Serbia is the only accredited provider of entrepreneurship education services in Serbia. It is a locally managed and funded entity affiliated with Junior Achievement Worldwide, a global organization founded in 1919 in the United States. The overall goal of JAS is to educate young people about entrepreneurship, financial literacy and business, and to enable the business sector to take an active role in preparing and inspiring young Serbians to become contributing members of society. Since 2005, JAS has operated as an independent non-governmental, non-profit organization.

JAS implements educational programs for elementary and high school students in the field of entrepreneurship, financial literacy and job readiness, verified by JA Worldwide and accredited by the Serbian Ministry of Education. The programs represent best practices for developing entrepreneurial skills and knowledge of the market economy and include activities such as competitions, fairs and online competitions. All programs are implemented across the education system, either as part of the school curriculum or as after-school activities.

NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL OF MACEDONIA

The National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM) is a platform that represents the interests and needs of young people, acts as a link between all stakeholders and ensures the commitment and active participation of young people in decision-making at every level. NYCM is a representative body of youth organizations in the Republic of North Macedonia. The Council brings together trade unions, youth organizations, youth-oriented organizations and youth wings of other organizations in order to promote and represent young people and their rights in the Republic of North Macedonia.

NYCM members are diverse and bring together organizations operating at national and regional levels, in rural and urban areas, student organizations, branches of international organizations and other types of associations. In the process of realizing its goals, the MNT represents the interests of young people of the Republic of North Macedonia, regardless of their socio-economic status, gender, race, ethnic and cultural origin, political and religious beliefs, sexual orientation, gender identity or any other form of difference.

PIXEL

Pixel is an education and training institute with over 20 years of experience in the following sectors: (1) organization of international courses and seminars; (2) planning and coordination of European projects; (3) organization of international events and conferences.

Pixel has successfully coordinated and managed more than 140 European projects. In Italy, Pixel collaborates with

various organizations, including universities, research centers, vocational education and training institutions, adult education institutions and schools. At a European level, Pixel has developed cooperation agreements and partnerships with over 500 institutions. Pixel has been organizing international conferences since 2001. Among these, three are organized annually. Pixel has obtained UNI EN ISO 9001:2000 certification and is also accredited by the Ministry of Education for the education and in-service training of school staff.

XANO

XANO, founded in 2010, aims to promote growth opportunities for individuals and for society in general, creating synergies, tools and methodologies for the diffusion of culture and the promotion of active citizenship among people and organizations.

The organization is an association of secondary school teachers, vocational training and trainers in various disciplines which concentrates its activities in the field of education, training and cultural promotion at a European level, qualifying itself in sectors such as youth work , student entrepreneurship, volunteer support and other topics. Furthermore, the association operates as an orientation center for socially disadvantaged young people through strategies for inclusion in the educational system or in the world of work. The organisation's activities and objectives are inspired by the principles of equal opportunities for disadvantaged people and between men and women.

Abstract

This report, an integral part of the project “Virtual Internships for Inclusive Societies”, promoted by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) – (Project number: 101090094 — VI4IS), aims to create an original product, in the form of a relatively synthetic set of functional guidelines to represent a useful interpretative and managerial tool for all those who intended to interface with a sector which, although it rose to prominence in the day-after of the Covid-19 pandemic, has never been object of systematic treatment by policy makers.

What is presented below is the result of the work carried out both in the field and through desk research activities during the initial phases of the project, which saw the involvement, in addition to the Pixel staff, of over 80 participants in the events promoted by us in collaboration with the ITS Agroalimentare of Teramo, the Academy of Fine Arts of Brera and the Machiavelli Institute of Florence.

Introduction to virtual internships in the Italian educational panorama

In the context of a rapidly evolving job market, especially in light of the long wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, young people have had to face the challenge of bridging the gap between the skills acquired in an educational system like the Italian one, equipped of a predominantly theoretical approach and the practical skills required by the world of work. Internships, considered a type of work-based learning, have emerged as an effective means of addressing youth unemployment and providing young people with the relevant skills needed for a successful transition from the world of education to the labor market.

Online internships can be organized in a totally virtual format, where the trainee is expected to carry out his or her assigned tasks entirely remotely, or in a hybrid format, where the physical presence of the trainee for a certain number of hours is instead expected in varying proportions. Although the effectiveness of internships is universally recognized, the use of digital tools in the process of implementing activities has not yet been fully exploited. The prevalence of virtual, i.e. internship programs conducted through or together with the use of computers and digital tools, which is functional to guarantee the intern to take part in company life remotely, has increased significantly over the last two years. This was largely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to adopt remote working arrangements. This phenomenon has marked a significant transformation in the way in which Italian companies, organizations and

universities offer internship opportunities to their students and young graduates.

Within the formal education system, virtual internships have become common practice, often being integrated into higher education programs. These internships offer students the opportunity to apply the theoretical concepts learned in the classroom in real situations, acquire practical skills and establish valuable connections with professionals active in their field of interest. Numerous Italian universities and institutes offer virtual internships as an integral part of their curriculum, frequently in collaboration with private companies and non-profit organizations.

In the context of non-formal education systems, virtual internships are used in several training and development programs. They can be part of youth development programs, vocational training courses or entrepreneurship training initiatives, offering young people the opportunity to develop professional skills in several areas as well as providing them with professional experience in a wide range of industries. A broad spectrum of organizations, including NGOs, government agencies and private companies, offer virtual internships for young people.

What makes virtual and hybrid internships even more interesting is the possibility of collaborating with companies and organizations located in different parts of the world, thus allowing students a global perspective and the opportunity to gain work experience, even if they are logistically unable to move from and to Italy. Some examples of Italian organizations offering virtual internships include the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Italian Chamber

of Commerce in Western Canada, the University of Bologna, as well as leading companies in high technology sectors such as example the subsidiary of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, Leonardo SpA.

To sum up, virtual internships are emerging as an important resource for young Italians seeking to develop practical skills and gain work experience in the context of an ever-changing world of work. With the growing adoption of digital tools and the widespread availability of virtual opportunities, virtual internships are playing a key role in helping young people prepare for future challenges and opportunities in the context of a rapidly evolving society.

Opportunities and threats in the implementation of virtual internships in Italy

The current education and training landscape in Italy is undergoing a rapid and significant transformation thanks to the implementation of virtual internships. This mode of learning offers a range of relevant opportunities but is also facing challenges that require a thoughtful approach as well as a wide range of dedicated resources.

In this chapter we will explore in detail the opportunities and threats associated with virtual internships within the Italian context, in an attempt to provide a useful reference framework to guarantee the best possible organizational approach to all operators active in the field of education as well as to companies and institutions.

Opportunities

- **Universal Access to Education and Training**

A key benefit of virtual and hybrid internships is accessibility. Indeed, they widen the doors of education and training, allowing a wider audience to participate in high-quality learning programs. This is particularly significant in a country characterized by a varied geography such as Italy, where students in remote areas or with mobility limitations would not be able to fully benefit from such opportunities due to logistical difficulties.

- **Flexibility of time and location**

Virtual internships offer unprecedented flexibility. Students can adapt their study time to personal and work needs, allowing them to balance their studies with other responsibilities such as full-time work or family commitments. The ability to learn anywhere, anytime is a key factor in choosing virtual and hybrid internships.

- **Internationalization of Education**

The ability to collaborate with companies and institutions around the world through virtual internships offers students a global experience. This not only has the merit of enriching their skills, but also prepares them for an increasingly interconnected world of work, opening doors to international careers as well as the acquisition of knowledge inherent to extremely different, internalized professional (and non-professional) cultures through daily use.

- **Reduction of costs and environmental impact**

For students, virtual and hybrid internships can result in significant savings in terms of travel and accommodation expenses. This makes them more accessible and eliminates the financial burden often associated with higher education and vocational training. Furthermore, in the context relating to the social phenomenon of commuting workers, this approach determines a reduction not only of costs but also of potential emissions connected to a routine marked by repeated travel on public or private transport. It is a determining factor for many young people and professionals seeking professional development.

- **Personalized Learning**

Using digital technologies in virtual internships allows for more personalized learning. Programs can be tailored to meet students' specific needs, allowing them to progress at their own individual pace. This can lead to a deeper understanding of the concepts and skills learned.

Threats

As mentioned, virtual internships also face several challenges likely to pose a threat to their spread. Here is a short list of the main ones:

- **Internet Connection and Device Access**

A crucial obstacle may be related to the difficulties in accessing a stable, broadband Internet connection, as well as the possible lack of devices suitable for carrying out the professional tasks required remotely. Not all students have access to broadband or the latest computers, which limits

their participation in virtual internships. This represents an absolutely significant vulnerability precisely because it is susceptible to undermining the potential of access to virtual internships precisely for those who, by virtue of their geographical location in remote areas or coming from economic/financial contexts that tend to be more disadvantaged, would have a greater need to take advantage of this opportunity. The need to invest in technological infrastructure, as well as to reduce barriers to access, must be considered a priority.

- **Social Isolation**

Students engaged in virtual internships may feel isolated due to a lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers, peers and industry professionals. This isolation can negatively impact motivation and learning. Therefore, it is important to develop strategies that promote interaction and collaboration between students in virtual environments, for example through online forums, video chats, meetings and video conferences.

Recommendations for companies and institutions

The adaptation of regulations and the recognition of virtual internships may vary from region to region and from institution to institution. There is a need to coordinate efforts between different actors to ensure that such programs are adequately recognized nationally and internationally, allowing students to fully benefit from their learning experiences and facilitating their transition to the world of work.

Companies that host virtual internships must adapt to this training method in logistical, technological, methodological and organizational terms. This can involve a considerable commitment in terms of resources and staff training. Small businesses in particular may find this transition more complex but adaptation is the key to fully reap the benefits of this internship modality.

To sum up, virtual internships represent a powerful resource for education and training in Italy, but require in-depth attention to overcome obstacles and ensure that students can fully benefit from this modality of learning. Addressing challenges related to technological access, social isolation, quality of learning, regulatory issues and corporate adaptation will be key to the continued success of this form of internship in the Italian context, thus helping to prepare the new generations for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

National Forums: key outputs

The research work, aimed at extrapolating and highlighting guidelines and best-practices in the field of virtual internships took its first steps from a desk research conducted by the Pixel research team.

The results obtained were then compared with the opinions of the project's target groups (employers, educators, practitioners in formal and non-formal education, youth and youth workers). This was made possible through the organization of three events during which experts, organizers and users of virtual internship programs had the opportunity

to discuss and compare their respective expectations and needs.

Within the following lines we present a brief overview of the events, in association with the outputs resulting from them.

The "***First Forum on virtual internships in formal and non-formal education***" was held at the ITS Agroalimentare Higher Technical Education Institute of Teramo on 13 June 2023 and saw the participation of 19 people, including virtual internship experts, employers, representatives of educational institutions, representatives of youth organizations and young people.

The event began with an introduction of the "Virtual Internships for Inclusive Society" project by Pixel staff with reference to the partnership, objectives, target groups and expected results, followed by a presentation on virtual internship experiences by Miriam Tullii, manager of ITS Agribusiness who coordinated international projects on online internships and online work-based learning.

The event then evolved into the form of a round table where experts, employers, representatives of educational institutions, representatives of youth organizations and young people had the opportunity to analyze the topic of virtual internships, exchanging and comparing their respective points of view and their respective opinions, as well as providing each other with ideas, expectations, experiences and know-how.

The main findings of the discussion focused on the strengths and weaknesses of virtual internships, as well as opportunities and threats.

Pixel also prepared an online questionnaire administered to those present in QR Code format, the aim of which was to provide an overview of the point of view of the experiences, expectations and opinions of the different groups involved.

The ***second Forum on virtual internships in formal and non-formal education*** was held on 21 June 2023 at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milan.

The host institution took care of the logistical organization of the event in terms of location, sustenance and identification of the target group in accordance with the project guidelines, under the supervision of Pixel.

The Brera Academy of Fine Arts has sent several invitations and a total of 39 participants, including experts in virtual internships, employers, representatives of educational institutions in the field of formal and non-formal education, representatives of youth organizations, university professors, young students and workers took part in the event.

The meeting took place in the form of a discussion, during which the participants had the opportunity to discuss the topic of virtual internships, exchanging points of view and opinions and making their experiences and knowledge on the topic available, in order to outline a structured and homogeneous picture of the Italian context that could highlight expectations and best practices.

In order to obtain relevant information for the drafting of the National Guidelines, Pixel prepared an online questionnaire, administered to those present in QR Code format, the results of which are summarized in the next chapter.

The ***third Forum on virtual internships in formal and non-formal education*** was held in Florence on 5 July 2023 at the “Centro Machiavelli – Italian Language School”.

The host institution took care of the logistical organization of the event in terms of location, sustenance and identification of the target group in accordance with the project guidelines, under the supervision of Pixel.

22 participants, including experts in virtual internships, employers, representatives of educational institutions in the field of formal and non-formal education, representatives of youth organizations, university professors, young students and workers took part in the event.

The meeting took place in the form of a conference, during which those present had the opportunity to discuss the outcomes deriving from the previous forums, on the basis of the literature acquired through the initial desk research, in order to outline in an even clearer way the guidelines on which to base the subsequent steps of the project, in order to allow effective planning on the basis of the guidelines present here.

Results

The Fora organization proved to be functional in order to provide the basis for an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats deriving from the organization and implementation of virtual internships.

From the analysis of the questionnaires completed by the participants it emerged that:

- The main strength of virtual internships is represented by their flexibility as well as the possibility they offer to save on mobility, resulting in greater accessibility to them and fewer negative externalities in economic and environmental terms.
- A further strong point of virtual internships is to be found in the possibility of guaranteeing professional experiences of international caliber even to those who do not have the possibility of physically moving away from their national territory due to logistical or contingency-related reasons.
- The main weakness is related to the lack of face-to-face human interaction and the difficulty in organizing and monitoring activities. Furthermore, for some companies the manual component of the work is a fundamental aspect that cannot be carried out in a virtual internship.
- One threat is linked to the digital skills needed to carry out a virtual internship. It was interesting to note the divergence of expectations regarding the skills needed to carry out the expected tasks, as employers expect candidates to already possess these prerequisites, while young people expect to obtain them during on-the-job training.

Practical steps for organizing virtual internships

The one in this chapter is intended to be a brief 15-point list of practical steps and suggestions to adhere to when approaching the organization of a virtual internship program

1. Definition of goals and objectives

- Determine the purpose of the virtual internship program. What skills or experiences do you want interns to gain?
- Set clear, measurable goals that align with your organization's goals.

2. Guarantee of Legal and Regulatory Compliance

- Know Italian labor laws and regulations relating to internships.
- Ensure compliance with any necessary permits or documents.

3. Design

- Create a detailed internship plan, including roles, responsibilities and learning objectives.
- Define the duration, start date and end date of the internship program.
- Establish the number of working hours per week or month.
- Decide whether the internship will be paid or unpaid and comply with legal requirements.

- Determine whether there will be a subsidy and, if so, determine the amount.

4. Collaboration with educational institutions

- Partner with universities, colleges or trade schools to attract a pool of qualified candidates.
- Establish relationships with teachers and guidance services.

5. Creation of a Structured Onboarding Process

- Develop a comprehensive orientation program to introduce interns to your organization, its culture and expectations.
- Provide necessary resources, such as access to business tools, software and communications platforms.

6. Identification and Assignment of Supervisors

- Select experienced mentors or supervisors to guide interns during their virtual internship.
- Ensure supervisors are able to provide remote support and feedback.

7. Assignment of tasks

- Design meaningful projects and assignments that align with interns' educational and professional goals.
- Create a detailed work plan that includes deliverables, deadlines and milestones.

8. Technological Infrastructure

- Ensure that both interns and supervisors have the necessary technology available, such as laptops, internet connectivity and software tools.
- Set up virtual meeting platforms for communication and collaboration.

9. Communication and Feedback

- Establish regular communication channels, including video conferences, emails and instant messaging, to keep interns informed and engaged.
- Schedule periodic follow-up meetings and evaluations to provide feedback and evaluate progress.

10. Cultural Integration

- Encourage virtual interns to participate in team meetings, events, and social activities to foster a sense of belonging in your organization.
- Promote intercultural awareness and inclusion.

11. Evaluation and Assessment

- Implement a structured evaluation process to evaluate interns' performance and provide constructive feedback.
- Document the skills acquired during the internship.

12. Networking Opportunities

- Facilitate networking sessions or webinars to connect interns with professionals in your organization and industry.
- Encourage interns to build their professional networks.

13. Legal Agreements and Documentation

- Make internship agreements that outline terms, responsibilities and expectations for both parties.
- Make sure all parties sign the necessary documents.

14. Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

- Gather feedback from both interns and supervisors to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.
- Use the feedback to make improvements in future iterations of the virtual internship program.

15. Recognition and Certification

- Consider providing interns with certificates or letters of recommendation upon successful completion of the virtual internship.
- Recognize and celebrate interns' successes within your organization.

Conclusions

By systematizing the results that emerged from the a desk research and the data that emerged from the national forums, it emerged that a successful organization and implementation of internships should include at least a certain percentage of face-to-face work, therefore making virtual internships become hybrid.

This would guarantee to extrapolate the best of the two main models of professional training (virtual and on-site), guaranteeing the best possible meeting point between demand (represented by young people, students and workers) and supply (represented by entrepreneurs, employers, managers and human resources operators).

Hybrid Internships are, in our opinion, the best solution to guarantee on the one hand the expansion of the roles potentially covered by the intern, who would otherwise be excluded from all those cases likely to include at least a minimal component of manual work, and on the other, an effective and efficient monitoring system.

Students involved in hybrid internship programs will thus be able to take advantage of the dual benefits of the flexibility provided by working remotely, assisted by training that is also hands-on, carried out in the presence