

DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL
INTERNSHIP MODEL AND
ITS SUPPORT SYSTEM
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

DIM-4-HE

GUIDELINES OF
**DIGITAL
INTERNSHIP
FOR HIGHER
EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONS**

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Digital Internship Model

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INTRODUCTION

“Guidelines of digital internship” is a resource for higher education institutions (further – HEIs) that is focused on practical advice to improve the effectiveness of internships. This guide is intended to provide a brief overview of three stages of in-

ternships: before, during and after the internship. These guidelines stress the specifics of digital internships, however, the model and elements described in it can be applied to any form of internship.

WHAT IS A DIGITAL INTERNSHIP?

An internship is a period of practical training carried out by a student within a company or organisation. Digital (also called “virtual” or “remote”) internship provides students with an opportunity to gain professional experience at local or international level without the conventional requirement of being physically present in an office. It allows students to work for organisations that they might not otherwise have access to because of geographical distance. Digital internships are like traditional ones in that students still have work tasks to do, a supervisor to report to and communication with the team.

How is a digital internship different from a traditional internship?

- **Environment:** An in-person internship requires students to travel to an office, store, warehouse or other company location, whereas they can do a digital internship in home, dormitory or other space.
- **Communications:** With a digital internship, students conduct most business by email, online chat, video conferences or by phone.

- **Work hours:** An in-person internship typically follows a standard business workweek, like Monday through Friday, 9am to 5pm, for example. With a digital internship, students often have more control over creating a flexible schedule.
- **Relationship building:** Both internship types let interns build connections with colleagues, clients, fellow interns and customers, though it can be more challenging through a digital one. Face-to-face connections may work better for one person, however, digital tools provide many ways to connect online, too.

Hybrid internship combines elements of both virtual and in person work experience or a blend of in person and virtual synchronous engagement combined with asynchronous independently managed activity..

CHALLENGES TO BE AWARE OF WITH A DIGITAL INTERNSHIP

There might be a lack of structure and support:

An internship can become like a mentorship if the supervisor excels at providing structured supervision and support. Students might not get that same feeling of having been mentored if they're communicating only by email, zoom, and phone.

There might be less job training and guidance:

Similarly, students may get less training on and guidance about the duties of the job from the supervisor and colleagues at a remote internship than they would if they could see them face-to-face.

Students might not experience the organization's environment or the satisfaction of building relationships:

The drawbacks of online internships include the lack of in-person relationship building, immersion in the physical and cultural spaces of a firm or organization, and fewer opportunities to engage in the ad hoc interaction that typically arise during an on-site experience.

Students will have to be more self-motivating:

Without an in-the-flesh boss to answer to, they will have to muster the motivation from within to do their job.

DIGITAL INTERNSHIP MODEL

This model can be easily used in both in-person, digital or hybrid internship since it contains all the main elements of any internship and stresses the elements that are especially important for internship in the digital or hybrid form:

BEFORE THE INTERNSHIP

1. Creating/updating learning objectives
2. Preparing materials for internship
3. Helping students to find host organisations
4. Preparing students for internship
5. Preparing supervisors for internship

DURING THE INTERNSHIP

1. Ensuring intern's regular communication with supervisors
2. Ensuring interns' communication with each other
3. Providing opportunities to discuss internship issues

AFTER THE INTERNSHIP

1. Evaluating interns' performance
2. Ensuring interns receive summative feedback from supervisors
3. Identifying opportunities and difficulties in internship program



Digital Internship Model

1. BEFORE THE INTERNSHIP

Preparation for the internship is very important for its successful start and proceeding. Activities during this stage should be aimed at making sure that students are well-prepared, focused and productive during their internship. Vrien and colleagues (2010) stress that all actors involved (students, supervisor from HEIs and supervisor from the host organisation) need to be willing to make the necessary effort. Establishing a common understanding between the three stakeholders before starting the internship and a joint guidance of the internship students by both company and higher education institution seems a necessity. ITC tech-

nologies may provide a means to communicate more intensively together, helping to bridge the differences between the goals and expectations of the company and HEI (Gerken et al., 2012).

The main steps HEIs should take before the internship:

- Create learning objectives
- Prepare materials for internship
- Help students find their host organisation
- Prepare students for internship
- Prepare supervisors for internship

1.1. CREATE LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR INTERNSHIP

FGDGD Learning objectives are statements that describe what information, skills, and behaviors students should be able to demonstrate after receiving training.

Writing clear internship objectives is important because:

- Objectives define what you will have the students do.
- Objectives provide a link between expectations, learning and grading.

Purpose of Learning Objectives:

- The objectives should help the student and the supervisors from your HEI and from the receiving organisations to evaluate the learning progress of the intern.
- Learning Objectives should not try to cover all aspects of the internship, but instead focus on select areas that the student will be exposed to throughout the internship.
- Each Learning Objective should involve new learning, expanded growth, or improvement on the job.

Guidelines for Writing Learning Objectives:

- A minimum of two objectives are suggested. Try to limit the amount of Learning Objectives to no more than six.
- Each Learning Objective should be specific, measurable, and limited to a single definite result. A measurable Learning Objective is a statement that clearly and precisely describes what it is the intern will accomplish by performing a task(s).
- Specific learning objectives may be included in a digital internship.

Example:

- Acquire hands-on experience and demonstrate skills of working in a virtual team.
- Explore and recognize the different information acquisition styles and preferred information handling strategies of virtual team members.
- Use the diverse working styles and traits of virtual team members to successfully collaborate in virtual environments.
- Explore effective general learning strategies and those applicable specifically to virtual learning environments.

- Carry out self-directed learning and learning in an online environment.
- Recognize how various learning approaches and strategies have direct workplace application.

Steps to Writing Learning Objectives

1. Identify the noun, or thing you want students to learn.

Example: alternative text for images.

2. Identify the level of knowledge you want. In Bloom's Taxonomy, there are six levels of learning. It's important to choose the appropriate level of learning, because this directly influences the type of assessment

you choose to measure your students' learning.

Example: Apply alternative text for images.

3. Select a verb that is observable to describe the behavior at the appropriate level of learning using Bloom's Taxonomy.
4. Add additional criteria to indicate how or when the outcome will be observable to add context for the student. Example: Apply alternative text for images based on the context of the page.

An article that might be helpful for creating learning objectives: [Model for writing objectives](#)

1.2. PREPARE MATERIALS FOR INTERNSHIP

The package of necessary materials (documentation) should be developed and made available to students and supervisors before the internship. The list of materials useful for internship and digital internship can be expanded according to the needs of your HEI.

BASIC DOCUMENTATION FOR INTERNSHIP

- Internship agreement
- Internship program description/regulations
- Template of process description for internship organization/ timeline of internship process
- Intern's self evaluation form
- Host organisation's evaluation form of intern's performance
- Template of internship report

GUIDELINES

- Guidelines for supervisors at HEIs
- Guidelines for supervisors at receiving organisations
- Guidelines for students
- Communication guidelines
- Guidelines on how to organise online introductory event for internship supervisor

1.3 HELP STUDENTS FIND THEIR HOST ORGANISATION

In general, it is the responsibility of a HEI to ensure that students get an internship, and many HEIs are taking a great role in connecting students to internship opportunities. Some institutions basically help with a résumé, however, a list of potential host organisations and student's preparation for the interview with them are all crucial components to the satisfaction and success of an internship experience.

Make sure to provide students with basic information and resources for finding internship places. Several possible ways are useful:

- provide information about organisations – potential internship sites – in HEI career centre or similar structure; outline in-person and remote internships;
- provide information about ways to find vacancy notices on companies' and organisations' websites;
- provide guidelines on how students can optimize their profile on LinkedIn or similar platforms to apply for internship ;
- provide information about Erasmus+ internship offers (see [Erasmus+ internship offers](#)).

It is important to match the student with the right host organisation. A student-industry and student-organisation profile matching approach is proposed to evaluate students' profiles and map the academic criteria to potential companies offering internship placement. Student's internship should be tied to desired career fields.

In many cases, it can be difficult for students to find good internships, particularly if they're interested in entrepreneurial or non-profit opportunities or if they're unable to pay the fees that some internship matching services charge. But it can be a challenge for small companies, startups, and nonprofits to find qualified interns. Different internship search sites might be helpful to match the intern with the organisation at national or global level (especially in case of digital or remote internship) (e.g., [Getting an Internship | InternMatch](#)).

1.4. PREPARATION OF STUDENTS FOR THE INTERNSHIP

Informative preparation

We suggest organising the introductory lecture about the internship. It serves as an orientation event for students before the internship starts and gives an opportunity for students to receive essential information about internship requirements and process, to hear examples of good practice and ask questions, as well as to get to know their internship supervisors from HEI. Introduction to internship can be done through video conference. The presence of the director of the study program or coordinator of internship (or similar position) and supervisors from HEI in the introductory lecture is recommended.

Topics to be presented in the introductory lecture:

- The role of internship in obtaining the qualification
- Internship objectives
- General description of internship (duration and process, tasks, deadlines, etc.)
- Requirements for internship (deliverables (report, diary, etc.)), communication with supervisors, etc.)
- Criteria of assessment of internship performance
- Information about documentation/materials related to internship
- ICT tools useful for digital internship (see the list of digital tools)

- Suggestions and resources for seeking internship sites (receiving organisations)
- Introducing students to internship supervisors from HEI
- Examples of successful internship experience (possibly, presented by alumni)
- Support provided by HEI to interns in the course of internship and channels of asking for support
- Q and A session

Technological preparation

HEI should consider the needs of students to have some basic training in the use of digital tools necessary for video conferencing, networking etc. Interns need to have a lot of technological skills before they can get started and specific skills in using the ICT platforms because the technology used has an impact on the degree of involvement

from the student. Consider providing training in the specific technology that will be used for online communication with the company supervisor. Students in digital internship must possess the same skill-set as students in online study – high level of technical competence.

Psychological preparation

HEI should consider providing students with some training (seminar, introductory course) or material (written or in video format) as to how to be self-motivated, self-directed learner and disciplined intern to achieve internship objectives. Not all students have developed these attitudes and skills enough. Students who have been successful in online courses may find digital internships easier

to manage in the sense of time management skills, autonomy and self-motivation. High motivation for successful achievement of internship objectives is very important since even very well-designed digital internships assign the predominant responsibility for asking questions and seeking advice to the student.

1.5. PREPARATION OF SUPERVISORS FOR THE INTERNSHIP

Internship represents a mutually beneficial relationship between supervisor and students, in which interns apply conceptual and theoretical classroom knowledge to the organisation to gain valuable skills and experiences that are useful to their future professional endeavors. **Supervising relationships are characterized by an “expert” providing support and guidance to a “novice”.**

Important characteristics of internship supervisors both in HEI and organisations are:

- Interest in working with students;
- Having time to invest in the internship, especially during the first few weeks;
- Having qualities such as leadership, strong communication, and patience.

Usually supervisors might be consumed in other activities, meetings, or phone calls, which can lead to a lack of time for supervision over the intern. So it is very important that the internship materials, supervision process and methods as well as digital tools for doing it remotely are well described, adapted and prepared. Internship supervisors need guidance and direction on how they can make supervision more effective and what to expect from it.

Supervisors play an essential role in the shaping of the (online) relationship, specifically in terms of how available they are to the intern and the use of various tools that allow them to support the intern effectively. Highly structured guidance is necessary to ensure independent

working. Meeting both internship supervisors before the internship is important – a student’s close relationship would be the best for the success of an internship. Initial connection that the supervisor and student make is crucial to the expectations of the student and sets tone for the relationship throughout the internship.

We recommend to organise a meeting with all the supervisors before the interns are assigned to them and to organisations and talk through the main points and provide information as to:

- what is the minimum frequency of meetings with interns and what forms of meetings are expected – individual or group;
- what is the role of supervisor at all stages of internship;
- what are the deliverables of intern during and after the internship and the evaluation criteria of intern’s performance;
- what technologies for communicating with and reviewing student’s work are available in HEI;
- when or in which cases should they contact the student’s supervisor from the receiving organisation;
- what support from HEI supervisors can receive in the course of supervision, including guidelines, handbook, advice etc.

Make sure that supervisors from receiving organisations receive all the necessary information about the internship before it starts – no later than

when a student is assigned to the organisation. HEI might consider organising an online event for interested supervisors from organisations to give a short introduction into the internship program. Develop a process description in HEI about who (student or HEI representative) and when sends information about the internship program and interns to the host organisation and develop a list of materials/information that should be provided to host organisation and supervisor, for example:

- intern’s name and contact information
- the name of higher education institution, study program, level of study
- name and contact information of supervisor from the higher education institution
- the duration of internship and the number of internship hours; part-time or full-time internship
- the list of goals/objectives and tasks of the internship defined by HEI
- materials/documents of internship provided by HEI (guidelines or handbook for supervision, assessment forms, regulations etc.)
- digital tools (programs) that are specific for the study field and business field, useful to carry out internship tasks and/or available to intern (e.g., architecture or design software)
- what time zone intern is in (in case of digital internship)
- the approximate number of hours a supervisor will have to devote to an intern.

2. DURING THE INTERNSHIP

In this stage, the focus will be on the development and skills through practical and authentic tasks. Constant communication and feedback between the intern and supervisors are key for

the success of digital internship. During internship HEI provides academic coaching and feedback, and the company provides task mentoring and guidance.

2.1. ENSURE INTERN'S REGULAR COMMUNICATION WITH SUPERVISORS

Regular communication between the intern and supervisors is very important. Usually supervisors from the receiving organisations meet interns more frequently than supervisors from HEI since their roles differ, however, guidance and monitoring from supervisor from HEI is crucial. Make sure that interns have regular face-to-face interaction (online or in-person) with supervisors to discuss the points listed below. These meetings will help interns to stay on track with their internship objectives and prepare deliverables of the internship.

Supervisor's communication with intern should be directed to:

- facilitating intern's reflection and having conversation about his progress towards internship objectives and reviewing them;
- giving feedback about intern's performance;
- encouraging and motivating intern;
- listening to and discussing intern's concerns if such arise.

2.2. ENSURE INTERNS' CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

Though all interns in a study program usually have the same basic requirements to finish the internship, their experiences with work tasks, integration into the host organisation and support from supervisors and co-workers are perceived differently. By sharing internship experience, approaches and solutions in work tasks and receiving feedback and advice, students give and receive support from each other.

Communication channels and group chats can help students to feel connected to each other and provide them with another channel of support during the internship. Students should have an online forum to address problems and suggest solutions on a weekly basis. HEI can also use educational technologies such as e-portfolio or blogs to exchange ideas, or video-web conferencing to bring peers together.

Some concerns may arise when students share output with one another – issues about copyright, intellectual property, and nondisclosure need to be addressed when setting up communication channels for student networking.

2.3. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO DISCUSS INTERNSHIP ISSUES

HEI should consider organising the support for interns in a format of regular seminars (weekly, bi-weekly etc.) together with peers, internship coordinators and supervisors from HEI (e.g., through video conferencing), aimed at exchanging experiences for the key assignments and receiving advice and support from both HEI and peers as well as clarifying temporary issues. Your HEI might consider students' attendance of two or three web conferences during the term.

3. AFTER THE INTERNSHIP

Evaluation of interns' performance and progress are the central themes after the internship. It is important for an intern to receive a summative feedback on his/her performance and competencies

by the internship supervisor for his further professional development. At this stage, interns also do an independent self-assessment of their performance during internship.

- **Evaluate intern's performance in the internship according to the criteria defined before the internship**

Usually performance evaluation is based on the assessment given by supervisors. Your HEI should decide as to what weight in the final evaluation of internship is given to the supervisor from HEI and to supervisor from the receiving organisation. However, students' self-assessment of their performance and progress during the internship might also constitute some part of the final grade.

You might find useful to adapt in your HEI these templates:

[Intern's self-assessment form](#)

[Host organisation's evaluation form of intern's performance](#)

- **Ensure that interns receive summative feedback from supervisors about their performance;**

it is recommended that during the feedback supervisor and the intern discuss the accomplishment of internship objectives that were defined before the internship and substantiate.

- **Identify opportunities and difficulties in internship program**

At the end of internship, the evaluation of cooperation between HEI and the receiving organisations is very recommended. It should include identification of strong points and future opportunities as well as problems or difficulties so they can be avoided in the future. If the cooperation has been really problematic, the possibility of finding other hosting companies needs to be looked at. In case of digital internship, allocate special attention to evaluate technological aspects in the course of internship: availability and usefulness of certain technological tools, intern's and supervisor's readiness in the use of these technologies

We suggest asking host organisations or supervisors from host organisations about their satisfaction with cooperation with HEI, adaptability of internship objectives to their organisation's scope and specifics, organisation's readiness to accept interns in the future etc.