Intellectual Output 2

Model for Virtual Internships in Vocational Education and Training

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Virtual Internships in Vocational Education and Training

Advances in technology, including high-speed internet connections and low-cost portable devices, have made the virtual workplace a reality. As a consequence, the prevalence of virtual internships in different countries, industrial sectors and higher education has increased in the last years, although the available data indicate that they have not been fully exploited in VET as yet.

This is why organizations led by the coordinator Belgrade Open School (Serbia), Technical School Uzice (Serbia), Interprojects (Bulgaria), University of Padova (Italy), joined together to implement the project "Virtual Internships in Vocational Education and Training – VIVET", funded by the Serbian National Agency for Erasmus + Program for 20 months, from September 2017 to April 2019, with the aim to:

- develop and test the model for virtual internships in VET in line with the needs of VET teachers, trainers and mentors and VET students, especially students from disadvantaged groups;
- promote the organization of virtual internships in VET;
- promote strategic cooperation between educational institutions and business sector focused on virtually supported internships;
- support the Europe 2020 priority of development of vocational skills considering labour market needs.

As far as it can be acknowledged to date, this is the first project that aims to develop virtual internship model and platform applied to vocational education and training including secondary education. Starting from the effort of the precedent similar projects, which were applied to the higher educational system from other post-secondary VET education or to international virtual internships, this project intends to build on the results achieved and present a continuation to a new educational context.

The VIVET Project has a purpose to draw the model of virtual internships in the VET schools system that will strive to tackle the challenges related to the particularities of the virtual experience and, in the same time, meet the indications of the EU Commission regarding the innovation policies that need to be led towards the enhancement of the youth employability as well as all the actions that have to be taken into account to break the barriers that the disadvantaged groups of young people, constrained by geographical or physical condition, face while in search of a professional experience.

A Virtual Internship involves the use of an Information and Communication Technology supported environment, where students interact with each other, and companies, independent of time and space and across traditional geographical boundaries. In this environment, effective communications are created between students, VET schools and company representatives, in order to carry out a specific and meaningful work-based activity that fits within the student's compulsory educational curriculum.

The Virtual Internships in the VET system imply the involvement of **three main actors**:

a) **The VET Student** on whom the main focus is addressed since the virtual internship is completely planned to enhance his or her employability opportunities by gaining an internship business experience enriched by digital competences;
b) **The VET School** where the Teaching Staff plays an important role in the educational training as well as in creating links and connections for the students with the companies;
c) **The Companies** that have the opportunity to prepare VET students in advance for the labour market and in the same time manage an internship in a flexible time frame.

There are many VET students that face obstacles, related to geographical or to physical reasons, in having a professional training experience as well as there are business organizations that have opportunities can be designed for a virtual environment (students living in remote areas, students

with disabilities, etc). Also, some workplace environments are potentially unsafe for VET students, although they can offer an excellent learning opportunity. The virtual environment can be a frame where distances or exposure to the potentially unsafe environments are inevitably shortened.

Virtual internships make internships over great distances affordable to a wider range of young talents. Virtual settings are an excellent opportunity to combine school education and training with a short and focused part-time engagement in a company. A good-quality virtual internship does not only allow the intern to grow and demonstrate disciplinary skills, but also lets him or her gain valuable insights into a specific domain. The intern can acquire contextual knowledge, often a combination of industry status, company size and position, regional aspects and other characteristics of the particular setting. And on top, interacting with practitioners helps the VET intern develop more global skills such as oral and written expression in the business world, flexibility, creative thinking, virtual collaboration or productivity. Typically, virtual internships also boost the intern's self-esteem and self-efficacy, two very crucial aspects that employers are looking for.

Benefits of the Virtual Internships for All Parties

Among others, the benefits of the virtual internships to the VET Students, may be the following:

- Avoiding travelling and commuting. Students can sit at home and gain the training for the particular industry. Individuals who have physical disability or any kind of health problem may do the virtual internship while staying in the comfort of their homes.
- Flexible timing options. In most internships of the virtual kind, the timings are flexible.
- Gaining practical advice, encouragement and support.
- Developing self-confidence and a sense of empowerment.
- Overcoming social isolation.
- Developing interpersonal skills.
- Developing digital skills and online collaboration skills.
- Identifying goals and establish a sense of direction.
- Gaining insight into the world of work and explore career options.
- Developing social and professional contacts.
- Learning from the experience of others and adapt his own experience, skills and knowledge.

However, in the context of virtual internships, the interns may not have access to the same support mechanisms due to both temporal and geographic separation from their supervisors or peers. This may generate some uncertainties and ambiguities. Role ambiguity may be particularly transferable to e-internships as the interns are less likely to have regular inductions and may face significant ambiguity due to their lack of work experience and the reliance on computer-mediated interactions. However, ambiguity may be reduced by frequent interactions with supervisors that provide individuals with structure and standards, all of which will facilitate team work.

One of the options to alleviate the risks mentioned is organizing the blended virtual internship experience. **Blended Virtual Internships** are where on line virtual experience is implemented with temporary "travels" to the company's place. Implementing the model requires coordinated action among all actors involved.

Virtual internships bring tangible **benefits to Companies** like:

- Looking for interns from far off locations. The number of options for employers to choose from widens greatly when it is a virtual internship.

- Having flexible time schedules. Virtual experiences do not have to abide by the rules and regulations of routine office.
- Having interns that can be trained based on the convenience of the company and the VET Student.

VET schools can also gain some significant benefits form organizing virtual internships. The increased possibilities generated by flexible internship models through the integration of virtual mobility activities can also contribute to the attraction of a study programme. The introduction of virtually supported coaching, mentoring and peer feedback or group work that the virtual exchanges provide can contribute to an overall enhancement of the learning experience being offered.

The organization of the virtual internships can be planned according to the three main phases:

- **Before**: the moment when the VET School and companies get in touch in order to set up the plan of the Virtual Internship and to open the selection or matching process.
- **During**: the core of the development of the Virtual Internship based on tutoring moments, mentoring support, technical maintenance of the virtual platform and feedback.
- **After**: the reflection moment when all actors can take some time to recollect the aims and the actual development of the virtual internship and how this has been reached as well as what he she thinks that has gained during this experience.

The key success factors for organizing virtual internships

Based on the analysis of the state of the art regarding the organization of work based learning programs and apprenticeships for VET students in all project involved countries and the Europe done by project partners, but also based on the research on the specifics of virtual internships, the following principles or key success factors have been recognized:

- Apprenticeships or internships should be organized **virtually when it is possible and useful for all parties involved**; when virtual or blended internships are particularly beneficial for achieving learning outcomes related to obtaining professional qualifications as defined in VET curricula; when added value is assured, such as preventing the exposure to unsafe environment.
- Virtual internships in VET should encompass all **standards for good quality internships and apprenticeships**, namely written contract, mentorship, learning goals, evaluation, certification, and if possible under the national law, remuneration.
- **Mentorship** from the side of the company is of particular importance, as well as the tutorship and coordination from the side of the VET school. Mechanisms should be put in place to allow efficient cooperation and communication between all actors involved.
- VET **students motivation** should be addressed, having in mind the challenges of online collaboration.
- Support to students` **career development** should be provided, to assure reflection on the experiences and skills acquired and further improve his or hers career management skills.
- Technology should present the intuitive and easy to use medium for collaboration for all parties involved, assuring safe and stable environment adequately maintained.

Practical steps to start and develop a Virtual Internship

In order to realize a Virtual Internship the VIVET partnership proposes the setup of the following practical steps:

1.   Planning the Virtual Internship (VI)

   a) Meeting/online contact between VET school teachers/principals and Companies' officials in order to try to match the necessities of the Companies with the learning outcomes as defined in the VET Schools curricula;
   b) The team working on a virtual internship project should determine which learning outcomes specific to qualification profile can be achieved virtually within the company during the virtual internship;
   c) Company and VET School define together a Virtual Internship Project Plan (VIPP): activities, duration, aims, goals and outcomes, deadlines, required knowledge;
   d) The VET School identifies the Teacher that will play the role for the VET School Tutor for Virtual Internship;
   e) The Company identifies the Employee that will play the role of the Company Mentor;
   f) The VET School Tutor and Company Mentor register to the virtual platform for internships;
   g) VET School Tutor and Company Mentor check all the informative/guidance material related on how to use the virtual platform for internships and how to show it to the VET student;
   h) According to the VIPP the Company Tutor fills in on the virtual platform for internships the tasks and the contents of the VI activities.

2.   Putting in place virtual platform for internships

   a) The VET School identifies the IT technical expert that can set up the platform;
   b) It can be preferable for the IT expert to choose a common platform like Moodle or, like in the case of the VIVET project, Chamilo, that will have a familiar structure for the users;
   c) Make sure to set up a platform that facilitates as much as possible the online communication between the VET school, the student and the company with teleconferencing tools and easily accessible instructions on how to use it;
   d) The platform will have to be: accessible, usable, e-literate, tested before use and supported and GPDR compliant.

3.   Recruitment and matching of the VET Students

   e) The VET School Teachers advertise the VIPP within the VET School and try to motivate the VET students to participate in the VI, expressing the benefits of the VIs;
   f) The VET School Teachers identify among the VET students the profile of those students that respond to the requirements of the VIPP having in mind success factors described within this Model;
   a) The VET School Teachers invite the VET students identified according to the requirements of the VIPP to register to the VIVET platform and to fill it in with their data and with their educational profile;
   b) The Company Mentor checks the profile of the VET Student in order to understand if it matches to the Companies' necessities;
   g) If the match is done, Company Mentor, Vet School Tutor and VET Student get in touch in order to prepare the internship according to the VIPP.

4. Introduction of the VET Student(s) to the VIVET Platform and Internship

c) Preliminary face to face meeting among VET School Mentor, the Hosting Company Tutor and the VET Student(s) involved as a trainees;

d) VET School Tutor and Company Mentor describe to the VET Student(s) the VIVET platform sections;

e) VET School Tutor and Company Mentor illustrate to the VET Student(s) the VI activities, its goals and the related deadlines;

f) VET School Tutor and Company Mentor inform the VET Student(s) in relation with the legal issues, data protection and insurance coverage if available.

5. The internship Agreement – a written document mentioning:

a) The written names of the VET School Tutor, the Hosting Company (Mentor) and the VET Student involved as a Trainee;

b) The time frame: start and end date of the VI;

c) "Virtual Premises" or indication of the online Platform where the internship will take place;

d) Insurance references, if available;

e) Contents of the activities and goals according to the VIPP;

f) Indications related to the Data Protection especially if minors are involved in VI;

g) Production of three copies of the Internship Agreement signed by VET School Tutor, Company Mentor and VET Student.

6. Development of the VI

a) The VI activities are conducted by the VET Student according to the VI tasks and deadlines assigned on the VIVET platform;

b) VET School Tutor and Company Mentor monitor the development of the internship according to the deadlines of the VI activities;

c) VET School Tutor and Company Mentor assist the VET Student when facing challenges in carrying out the VI related tasks.

7. Conclusion of the internship – What have I acquired?

a) The VET Student will be invited to give a personal report on a specific reporting section of the VIVET Platform on how he or she has carried out the internship experience;

b) The VET School Tutor will guide the VET Student in the reflection on the tasks carried out and on the knowledge acquired in relation to the educational goals of the VI;

c) All parties will fill in feedback questionnaire designed for the purpose of the VIVET project to evaluate their experience and provide data for further analysis.