State-of-the-art in support of virtual placements

A study carried out in the framework of the EU-VIP project

Author(s): Ulla Rintala
Contributors to the document: all partners

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1. Introduction

Since more and more organizations operate internationally, the pressure on education professionals to arrange work placements introducing students to (international) working environments has increased. The EU-VIP project (Enterprise-University Virtual Placements) enhances the quality, efficiency and impact of international work placements by focusing on how to organize these placements, and thereby, boosting interaction between higher education institutions (HEIs) and enterprises using the advantages of the newest technologies.

EU-VIP provides the necessary (technical, pedagogical, organizational) models and services for:

- ➢ virtual mobility activities to prepare and follow-up students who go physically abroad for a placement
- ➢ fully virtual placements from selection, preparation, execution to follow-up.

The purpose of this survey is to give an overview of the state-of-the-art of (international) work placement measures in Europe. The main focus is on virtual placements and the virtual support of "physical" placements. The survey is primarily based on questionnaires for and feedback from the EU-VIP partner organizations as well as other studies and projects related to the subject matter. The HEIs in the partnership include Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE), University of Bologna (IT), Aalto University (FI), University of Turku (FI), West Pomeranian Business School (PL), FernUnivärsitet in Hagen (DE), Laurea University of Applied Sciences (FI), Tietgen Business College (DK), Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven (BE), Padua University (IT), and University of Groningen (NL).

2. Some definitions

A **work placement** refers to a period during which a student or a recent graduate undergoes supervised practical (work-based) training either in his/her own country or abroad. Career related experience can also have other names. In addition to "work placement", names include for example internship, practicum, practical training, traineeship and apprenticeship. The definition can slightly differ depending on the name. However, the basic idea is almost the same. The person taking on a work placement is, in turn, called a trainee, an intern or an apprentice among others. (adapted from several sources)

What is then a **virtual work placement**? Virtual work placement can be seen as a part of virtual mobility. The Being Mobile project (2006) defines virtual mobility as follows: "virtual mobility is a form of learning which consists of virtual components through a fully ICT supported learning environment that includes cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, having, as its main purpose, the enhancement of intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge". The same project also names virtual student placements as one of the four types of virtual mobility activities. (Bijnens et al. 2006)

The INTERN project (2007), in turn, as the first project to really put the idea of virtual work placements into practice, defines the term as follows: "a virtual work placement involves the use of an information and communication technology (ICT) 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, faculty 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 INTERN project. 2007)

Thus, virtual work placement activities enable students in the institutions to participate in virtual work placement projects for international companies. They also provide the opportunity for close cooperation with companies and students from HEIs in other European countries. (The INTERN project. 2007)

3. Work placements as a part of international mobility

3.1 "Physical" work placements

Many students' professional career starts already at university. Since more and more organizations operate internationally, students are also encouraged to take on work placements abroad. Indeed, practical training abroad is an important part of international student mobility, and thereby, a part of the internationalization of higher education. It is also an excellent alternative to exchange studies especially for students who are already at the final stage of their studies and looking for more work life related experience. The concept of (international) work placements, however, is rather ambiguous. The terms and conditions can vary significantly.

A work placement may be paid, unpaid or partially paid (in the form of scholarships). It may be part-time or full-time; it may take place during the summer or during other quarters of the year; and it typically lasts for 6-12 weeks, but can also be shorter or longer. Work placements may be required as part of the curriculum or optional and they can also be done abroad. Differences exist between institutions and even degree programs. Work placements are common above all in the medical, engineering, arts, law and business fields. (Adapted from several sources.) They can also be initiated and driven by any of the three actors involved: student, HEI or employer. The process is slightly different depending on the driving factor. (Q-Planet. 2009)

In the **university driven** scheme, the process is initiated by the university typically as a result of specific requirements in the curriculum. In most cases, this means that work placements are compulsory. In the **company driven** scheme, the driver is typically the employer who wishes to enter into direct contact with students – potential future employees – and to contribute to their training. And last but not least is the **student driven** scheme which is defined as a situation where the student is the main responsible for all actions regarding the placement process. Thus, the work placement is mainly based on students' own interests and motives. (Q-Planet. 2009) There are also a number of internship programs through which students can find placements.

According to a study conducted by the Finnish Centre for International Mobility (2004), participation in work placements abroad significantly contributes to students' personal and professional development, and especially the following aspects: (1) ability to implement and apply knowledge, (2) ability to acquire skills, (3) awareness of one's own skills and knowledge, (4) opportunity to create (professional) networks, (5) intercultural and international competence, and (6) professional goals. In many cases, participation in work placements abroad also influences the students' employment in the future. (Adapted from Nyström 2004.)

On the other hand, it is not only the students who benefit from work placements but also the other stakeholders involved (employers, HEIs). Practical training – at home and abroad – is a win-win situation for all. Tables 1–3 list some of these benefits; table 1 benefits to the students, table 2 benefits to the employer, and table 3 benefits to the HEI (adapted from several sources, contribution from all partners).

Table 1. Benefits to students

Benefits to students
➢ Opportunity to work in career related or professional environment and gain valuable work experience, develop one's CV
➢ Raise one's awareness of different career opportunities
➢ Identify skills, abilities and talents
➢ Implement and apply knowledge
➢ Develop (inter)cultural competence
➢ Improve language and communication skills
➢ Gain international experience
➢ Earn money and/or credits
➢ Create professional networking contacts
➢ Develop job search skills

Table 2. Benefits to the employer

Benefits to the employer
➢ Can evaluate students for potential full-time employment
➢ Give the employer access to quality candidates
➢ Students contribute new energy and ideas to the work place; they can also enhance innovation
➢ Use knowledge, competences and language skills
➢ Gain international experience
➢ Flexibility to meet the employer's needs
➢ Cost effective

Table 3. Benefits to the HEI

Benefits to the HEI
➢ Strengthen ties to alumni and the community, widen the HEI contact network
➢ Make the transfer out process easier for students
➢ Teaching (curriculum) and research can benefit through feedback from employers and students
➢ Help with retention and graduation
➢ Strengthen students' ties to the HEI when the experience is facilitated
➢ Gain international experience

3.2 Virtual work placements

Despite the fact that many HEIs use ICT to support their mobility activities, the institutions taking part in the INTERN project (2007) were the first to really put the idea of virtual work placement into practice. So why are virtual work placements a good idea? As aforementioned, many students start their professional career already at university. Since more and more organizations operate internationally, students are also encouraged to take on work placements abroad. However, a large number of students simply do not have the opportunity to take on work placements abroad for social, financial or other reasons (The INTERN project. 2007).

The idea of using ICT to support some form of virtual work placement with a foreign company is particularly suitable for these students. Indeed, virtual work placement enables students to take on work placements abroad without having to leave their home country. In addition, ICT can be used to prepare and follow-up physical placements to enrich the experience and make it even more effective and rewarding. (Adapted from the INTERN project. 2007) However, virtual work placements are not only beneficial for students but also for HEIs and companies.

As aforementioned, work placements can be initiated and driven by any of the three actors involved: student, HEI or employer. The process is slightly different depending on the driving factor. (Q-Planet. 2009) The INTERN project (2007), in turn, has found a number of useful models to describe the various alternatives of virtual work placements. These models consider three different sets of participants: students, academic or teaching staff, and company representatives. There are also a number of different ways in which virtual work placements can be organized around these players depending on the different requirements and particularities of the specific virtual placement. (The INTERN project. 2007) The initiator/driver can also be any of the aforementioned.

For example, a company in one country contacts a HEI in the same country and looks for work to be done by students in another country as part of a virtual work placement and supported by the academic or teaching staff of their own HEI, could be described as in picture 1 (The INTERN project. 2007).

Country A	Country B
staff	staff
company representatives	students

Picture 1. Virtual work placement model (1)

In another example, students from two (or more) different countries work for a company located yet in another country, the structure could be described as in picture 2 (The INTERN project. 2007).

Country A	Country B	Country C
staff	staff	staff
company representatives	students	students

Picture 2. Virtual work placement model (2)

In yet another example, a company in one country works with students from its own country along with another company already based in a second country, the structure could be described as in picture 3 (The INTERN project. 2007).

Country A	Country B
staff	staff
company representatives	company representatives
students	students

Picture 3. Virtual work placement model 3

All kinds of combinations as well as adaptations of the aforementioned are also possible. However, each brings its own complexities and makes demands on the organizational and management structure. Regardless of the model, a clear communications policy and a transparent understanding of one another's roles and responsibilities, different working methods and multiculturalism are extremely important. Indeed, virtual work is challenging not only at organizational level but also at individual and team level. (The INTERN project. 2007 & Heinonen. 2008)

Besides the benefits previously listed (tables 1 and 3), the INTERN project (2007) has identified a number of benefits that apply particularly in the case of virtual placements. Table 4 presents those benefits (adapted from the INTERN project. 2007).

Table 4. Benefits of virtual work placements to students and the HEI

Benefits to students and the HEI
➢ Provide a way to integrate work placements in full-time study programs ➢ Provide flexibility in time and space (e.g. for students with a job/disabilities) ➢ Provide a way to combine studies, work and social life ➢ Ensure regional mobility without the need to move and provide the opportunity to learn something about regional cultural differences ➢ Provide a way to learn new competencies (e.g. students learning a new language and new ways of working such as teleworking) ➢ Are a professional way to build partnerships between business life and the educational system

Also companies appreciate remote work placements. Table 5 presents those reasons (adapted from Van Dorp 2008). Also many of the benefits previously listed (table 2) apply in the case of virtual placements.

Table 5. Reasons for companies to participate in virtual internship programs

Reasons for companies to participate in virtual internship programs
➢ Increase of profits (productivity is higher with remote than with traditional work placements)
➢ Overcome space limitations (space restrictions can cause decrease in the number of placements as space is one of the most expensive inputs for companies)
➢ Overcome geographical limitations (no geographical relocation of workers is needed; companies do not need to relocate the student, he/she can remain at home)
➢ Reduce dependency on the labor supply of a particular area
➢ Overcome time limitations
➢ Reduce x-inefficiency of workers (avoid free riders; the work of the trainee can be measured easily, also when part of a team)
➢ Short in duration and/or unpaid (the firm can save money)
➢ Easier than traditional ones (employers are experimenting with the idea because more HEI students have access to computers, virtual work has become more common, and companies want to tap from more affordable labor sources)

4. Internship policies and measures

4.1 Overview on the current situation

In order to get a better view of the state-of-the-art of (international) internship measures, a survey was done in the EU-VIP partner organizations. These included Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE), University of Bologna (IT), Aalto University (FI), University of Turku (FI), West Pomeranian Business School (PL), FernUnivärsitet in Hagen (DE), Laurea University of Applied Sciences (FI), Tietgen Business College (DK), Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven (BE), Padua University (IT), and University of Groningen (NL). Answers were received from different organization levels (university, school, faculty). Thus, the findings are not necessarily always comparable or comprehensive, but give an idea of the current situation.

Despite the fact that some group-specific generalizations could be done, the survey just showed that work placements are yet another example of the HEIs' autonomy: the existing policies and practices vary not only between organizations but also within them. In what follows, the results from the questionnaires will be discussed in more detail. The original questionnaire can be found in appendix 1.

In many European countries, work placements are regulated by national legislation (Q-Planet. 2009). However, according to our study, there are also differences between HEIs and even within them. Differences can be found also between the different types of higher education. According to our study, in university colleges, practical training is usually included in the curriculum. It is made compulsory and students also earn credits for it, typically 15–30 ECTS. Salary is seldom provided, although this usually depends more on the employer not so much on the HEI.

In universities, in turn, the situation is a bit different and practices vary even between degree programs. In most cases, however, it seems that practical training is not compulsory. Students can include their practical training as part of the curriculum and earn credits for it, but it is not compulsory. Salary is provided depending on the employer. On the other hand, one of the partner institutions also informed that it does not encourage its students to accept any unpaid placements. In open universities, in turn, (international) work placements in general are rare. This could be the case, because open universities usually focus on distance learning and most of their students are already employed.

As aforementioned, work placements can be initiated and driven by any of the three actors involved: student, HEI or employer (Q-Planet. 2009). According to our survey, however, students usually find their work placements independently. The universities' role, in turn, is to provide general information and support to students during the process. There are also a number of internship programs such as IAESTE (The International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience), ERASMUS and Leonardo da Vinci through which students can find work placements.

Some HEIs also have their own "career web" – a website / intranet site where employers can place job, trainee and thesis ads to be browsed by the students, staff and alumni of a particular institution. An interesting example is also the departmental trainee advisor in one of partner organizations. In other words, a department in one of the partner organizations has its own trainee advisor (usually an older student at the department) whose main responsibility is to find work placements (abroad) for the students. The same person also assists students with other related issues. Students at the department are among the most active ones in the university to take on work placements abroad.

In most of the partner organizations, the annual number of students taking on work placements abroad is still significantly lower than the number of outgoing exchange students. This could result from a variety of reasons, and one is the fact that some HEIs simply cannot register all students going abroad for work placements. Indeed, most students do not even appear in any statistics unless they apply for university grants. The study abroad periods, in turn, are all registered. Another important factor could be the nature of work placements and the entire process related to it. Simply put, exchange studies are often the "easier" way to physically go abroad. This seems to be the case at least in many universities, perhaps not so much in university colleges.

Based on our findings from the questionnaires, students taking on work placements abroad also seem to be more on their own than those studying abroad. They are responsible for finding their own placements, and there are also fewer agreements and/or complete programs available. The actual experience of working abroad can also be somewhat harsh at times without the university support network, fellow students, etc. On the other hand, the benefits of studying abroad can also be more obvious, since studies at university level are usually based on more theoretical learning than practical (work-based) learning. In some cases, exchange studies can also be more easily accepted as part of one's degree than a work abroad period.

One of the partner organizations also guessed that the threshold for companies to employ international students can sometimes be too high. Companies may be ignorant about practical training in general as well as about foreign study programs. They may not be aware of how skilled workers students can be. Interning abroad can also be a matter of money. In some countries, students may be entitled for higher salaries in their own country than they are abroad.

In addition, despite the many scholarships and grants that are available, it still seems that it is easier to find funding for exchange studies than it is for work placements abroad. Indeed, studying abroad can sometimes be even more affordable than taking on a work placement abroad. Then again interns can also be provided with another type of compensation for their work such as free housing which is not so often applicable for exchange students.

Also the scholarship terms and conditions vary. In some cases, the work placements have to be officially approved by the HEI before students can apply for scholarships. Typically, students also need to be degree (Bachelor or Master) students enrolled for the ongoing semester and to have completed a minimum amount of credits per enrolled semester in order to be able to apply for scholarships. Also in some cases, only one scholarship per student is allowed. After the work placements, most students are obliged to write a report about their experiences.

Virtual experiences as a part of work placement are already commonplace, whereas fully virtual work placements are still fairly rare. Only two of the partner organizations, both of which were university colleges, informed that they had students taking on fully virtual work placements. However, the share of virtual placements out of all placements was still rather low (approx. 1–2 %). Then again, the real number of virtual work placements can also be higher.

As aforementioned, only a minority of the work placements students take are registered by the HEIs. Based on discussions with various stakeholders, virtual work is also something people do not always become aware of. Virtual placements are surprisingly commonplace for example in the field of media and architecture. However, people do not necessarily see it as virtual work, but just "regular work". Typical means of communication include email, Skype, videoconferencing and company intranets.

Based on our findings from the questionnaires, there are also differences in the evaluation process between HEIs and even their degree programs. Established institutional evaluation systems are still fairly rare, and only a minority of the partner organizations reported that they also request the participating teachers and companies to contribute to the evaluation. Typically, however, students are asked to write a report about their experiences which also includes an evaluation about the work placement. The reports are usually available on institutional websites, where also other students can find them.

Besides the traditional (written) reports, at least one partner has also tried "visual" reports by cooperating with the local student TV broadcaster and producing video interviews of students who have already participated in work placements abroad. The videos are available on both the institution's and the broadcaster's website. The reports – both written and visual – are also an encouragement and a source of inspiration and information for those students who are only planning on going abroad.

An interesting example of institutional evaluation systems, in turn, is the "virtual feedback and follow-up system" in one of the partner institutions. In the beginning of their work placement students set goals to be reached based on chosen competencies in their curriculum, and which will then be evaluated at the end of their work placement. During the placement students are able to reflect on their performance and evaluate their progress through the system. Teachers, in turn, are able to follow their students throughout the

process. The virtual feedback and follow-up system is also incorporated in a wider platform that serves as a data base on all information related to work placements.

4.2 Services and support to students

The EU-VIP consortium has categorized the activities, procedures and services supporting students taking on work placements abroad under four phases, in which the nature of the activities may vary:

1. **Preparatory phase:** when a student starts to think about going abroad, search for information on possible work placements, make application, etc.
2. **Before the work placement:** when the student's application is approved and he/she starts to prepare for the actual placement
3. **During the work placement**
4. **After the work placement:** when the student has returned to his home institution; the actual training is completed

The service model of HEIs, in turn, can perhaps be based on three levels all of which are applicable in the different phases:

1. **Provision of information:** providing fact-based information on work placements to students (e.g. websites, flyers)
2. **Counseling:** helping and advising students with their job-hunting problems (face-to-face consultation, email, telephone, etc.)
3. **Personal guidance:** providing long-term career guidance to students

The different initiatives partners take for students taking on work placements abroad are listed in tables 6–9 (contribution from all partners). However, not all initiatives are taken by all partners. The different activities can roughly be divided into two groups: online activities and traditional activities. Table 6 describes the different activities taking place in the preparatory phase. Table 7 focuses on the services available before the work placement, whereas table 8 focuses on the services provided during the placement. Finally, the activities taking place after the work placement are described in table 9.

Table 6. Activities in the preparatory phase

	PROVISION OF INFORMATION	COUNSELING	PERSONAL GUIDANCE
Online	Information about work placements, internship programs, job hunting in general, different countries and businesses, etc. (websites, intranets, learning environments)	Students are encouraged to contact the Career Services/International Student Services/etc. should they need any help (email, telephone, Skype and face-to-face)	Personality tests (online and face-to-face)
	Work placement reports of former trainees available online (websites)		
	General information about how to write an application/CV; how to make a video CV (websites)		
Traditional	General information about work placements, internship programs, etc. (flyers, newsletters)	Face-to-face consultation where students are oriented towards suitable placements / connected with companies (face-to-face)	Services of a career psychologist available to students (face-to-face)
	General information session about work placements (face-to-face)	Students can make personal appointments for e.g. CV guidance (face-to-face)	
	(Recruiting) events/fairs, where companies and potential placement opportunities in specific areas are represented (face-to-face)	Seminars to assistance students in writing applications/CVs and in preparing for job interviews (face-to-face)	

Table 7. Activities before the work placement

	PROVISION OF INFORMATION	**COUNSELING**	**PERSONAL GUIDANCE**
Online	Information about different responsibilities and practicalities related to interning abroad (websites)	Students are encouraged to contact the Career Services/International Student Services/etc. should they need any help (email, telephone, Skype and face-to-face)	
	Information about scholarships and grants (websites)	Advisory services for students who are interested in knowing more about certain countries, cultures, languages, etc. (online and face-to-face)	
	Information about students' placement decisions, when the application process is coordinated by the university; in such cases also the agreements need to be approved by the university (email, telephone and face-to-face)	"Virtual feedback and follow-up system" (online)	
Traditional	Information session for outgoing exchange students and trainees organized by the Career Services and the International Student Services (face-to-face)	Courses/seminars to improve students cultural, language and ICT skills (face-to-face)	
	Students' guidebook for work placements / career guide (manual and online)		

Table 8. Activities during the work placement

	PROVISION OF INFORMATION	**COUNSELING**	**PERSONAL GUIDANCE**
Online	Information about ongoing work placements available online (website)	Students can contact the Career Services/International Student Services/etc. during their placement should they need any help; in some HEIs the counseling services are also available for companies (email, telephone, Skype)	Intermediate reports / evaluations to monitor the ongoing work placements (online)
		"Virtual feedback and follow-up system" (online)	
Traditional	Students' guidebook for work placements / career guide (manual and online)		

Table 9. Activities after the work placement

	PROVISION OF INFORMATION	**COUNSELING**	**PERSONAL GUIDANCE**
Online	Information about the work placement report and its submission; completed reports usually available online (websites)	"Virtual feedback and follow-up system" (online)	
	Information about credit recognition (websites)		
	Final feedback and evaluation; in some HEIs also the companies are asked to contribute to the evaluation of work placements (online)		
Traditional		Evaluation/feedback discussions (face-to-face)	Services of a career psychologist available to students (face-to-face)
			Evaluation of the learning outcomes (face-to-face)

The different activities mainly take place in the first two stages (preparatory phase and before the work placement). Both online and traditional activities exist. However, the more personal a service is, the more likely it is going to be offered the traditional way. Information is usually provided online, whereas counseling and personal guidance take place face-to-face. Typical online tools include websites/intranets, email and Skype. Other means of communication and interaction such as videoconferencing are still fairly rare. According to some partners, students also prefer personal interaction with the staff even regarding access to and provision of information. However, this often requires physical presence.

Some HEIs have no personal guidance at all available for their students, whereas others are able to offer their services (mainly counseling) also to the employers. On the other hand, the difference between counseling and personal guidance can sometimes be blurry. Support during the work placement is often seen as the employers' responsibility, whereas activities after the placement mainly focus on the evaluation of work placements. The nature of services in the different stages also depends on the HEIs' overall role in the process.

4.3 Needs for improvement

When asked about the procedures and services requiring improvement, the availability of work placements (abroad) and the wider variety of options were something that almost all partners mentioned. A network of companies/institutions that are regularly willing to offer high-quality placements for students was, in turn, seen as one of the potential solutions to substantially improve the situation. The network was seen particularly helpful for the international students who are willing to intern in their host country, but whose local language skills are low.

Established contacts between HEIs and companies/institutions receiving the interns would, in turn, improve the cooperation between the two as well as ensure the actual work placements to be beneficial for both companies and students. It would also facilitate the process of searching placements and allow students to focus more on preparing for them. On the other hand, job hunting was also something many of the partner organizations saw as an integral part of students' career skills, and therefore it was considered as an important part of the entire experience.

Raising students' awareness of the procedures and possibilities for work placements abroad was also something many of the partners mentioned. There should be more students (of different backgrounds) going abroad. Other issues raised by the HEIs included annual review and evaluation of work placements, financial matters as well as general guidance and personal counseling, all of which need constant improvement. The importance of preparative training was also something many of the partners

emphasized, but only a few were able to offer as part of their service portfolio. In one of the partner organizations, however, preparative training was compulsory for all Bachelor students.

5. Success factors and challenges

The success factors and challenges regarding "physical" and virtual work placements have been derived mainly from the questionnaires, literature and discussions between members in the EU-VIP consortium. Also experiences gained in the INTERN project have produced a number of success factors regarding virtual work placements which are presented here. Many of the success factors and challenges are the same for both physical and virtual work placements. However, there are also differences between the two.

One of the first things that should be paid more attention to is the importance of practical (work-based) learning. Students need to be encouraged to take on work placements not only abroad but also at home. This could be done above all by integrating practical training as part of the curricula and by providing more established internship programs and funding alternatives for students. In addition, in order to maximize the benefits of work placements, students should always be prepared for their work placements and offered preparative training. Training is also recommended for the employers and HEI staff members.

Indeed, students are not the only ones who need encouragement. Companies need it as well. Especially small and medium sized companies should be encouraged to take on more both local and international students. Major progress could already be achieved by increasing the employers' knowledge about practical training in general. Several studies (Garam. 2005, Iivonen et al. 2009, etc.) have shown that employers' knowledge about practical training varies substantially.

Indeed, while the general assumption is that international experience is always an asset in job searching, employers with little or no international experience may have misconceptions about job seekers who have international credentials such as work abroad. Employers view students who have studied and/or worked abroad differently. (Garam. 2005) According to Garam (2005), job seekers with international experience can also be seen as over-qualified or their skills not matching the employers' requirements. In addition, excessive experience can also be seen as a sign of restlessness and unwillingness to commit.

The impact of international experience and student mobility can also be evaluated in comparison to other alternative experiences. Going abroad is also a decision "not to do something else" such as to graduate on time or gain more professional work experience at home. (Garam. 2005) In an ideal situation, however, this is not the case. HEIs should, therefore, integrate their academic curricula more effectively with the work-based skills development so that students are able to graduate on time, even if they include exchange studies and/or practical training abroad into their studies. HEIs should also follow their students systematically and register all students taking on work placements both at home and abroad.

From the companies' perspective, the harmonization of different procedures and practices is also desirable. However, harmonization is not always the best solution, since even educational goals and practices may

vary. Most employers also value flexibility and the fact that a work placement can be tailored to the company's prevailing needs. Therefore, excessive harmonization should be avoided. (Adapted from Iivonen et al. 2009.)

Finally, support in the different stages of work placement is also something that should be emphasized more. This becomes extremely important when the activities take place in virtual settings. All stakeholders need to be appropriately prepared and properly supported in the different stages. Practical training is not just something that students do. It is a learning process for all stakeholders involved – students, teachers and employers. An ongoing effort to improve the quality of work placements is also considered extremely important. Only through systematic evaluation by both students and employers can the quality of services and processes be improved.

Many of the aforementioned success factors and challenges are also characteristic of virtual work placements. However, there are also some special characteristics. The INTERN project (2007) has identified a number of success factors regarding virtual placements. These include the following.

> ➢ Students must be competent, well-prepared and able to work independently.
> ➢ Students and faculty must be prepared and committed to meet deadlines.
> ➢ There must be a clear and transparent set of aims and conditions.
> ➢ Students and faculty must be able to see the benefits of virtual work placements.
> ➢ Virtual work placements need to be an integrated part of the curricula.
> ➢ The management at each institution taking part should support the project.
> ➢ The company must be able to see the benefit of gaining new knowledge through cooperation.
> ➢ The company needs to be prepared to meet its commitments.
> ➢ The ICT infrastructure to be used needs to be user friendly and appropriate to the project.
> ➢ The task(s) to be completed need to be recognized as serious and meaningful work by all involved.

Then again, many of the aforementioned are also important in the case of "physical" placements. Virtual placements are perhaps just more vulnerable to the different faults and therefore need special attention.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this survey was to give an overview of the state-of-the-art of (international) work placement measures in Europe. The main focus was on virtual placements and the virtual support of "physical" placements. The survey showed that despite the fact that in many European countries work placements are regulated by national legislation, the existing policies and practices still vary not only between organizations but also within them. Much of the survey also confirmed our previous conceptions of student placements.

Indeed, (international) work placements may be either paid or unpaid depending on the employer. Qualified students may also apply for scholarships. The placements may be part-time or full-time, and they may take place during the summer or during other quarters of the year typically lasting for 1–3 months. However, shorter or longer placements are also possible. Work placements may be required as part of the curriculum or optional. The initiator and driver may be any of the three actors involved: student, HEI or employer. The process is slightly different depending on the driving factor. In most cases, however, it seems that students are the main driver and find their placements independently. The universities' role is more supportive.

In most partner organizations, the annual number of students taking on work placements abroad is still significantly lower than the number of outgoing exchange students. This could result from a variety of reasons, and one is the fact that some HEIs simply cannot register all students going abroad for work placements. The study abroad periods, in turn, are all registered. Also the nature of work placements is slightly different requiring more initiative from the students.

Virtual experiences as a part of work placements are already quite common, whereas fully virtual work placements are still rare. Only two of the partner organizations informed that they had students taking on fully virtual work placements. However, the share of virtual placements out of all placements was still rather low at least according to the statistics (approx. 1–2 %). The idea of using ICT to support some form of virtual work placement with a foreign company is particularly suitable for those students who do not have the opportunity to take on work placements abroad for social, financial or other reasons.

The activities, procedures and services supporting students taking on work placements abroad usually focus on the time before the actual placements takes place. Support during placements is, in turn, seen as the employers' responsibility. Both online and traditional activities exist. However, the more personal a service is, the more likely it is going to be offered the traditional way. Students also seem to prefer personal interaction with the staff even regarding access to and provision of information. Activities after work placements are mainly evaluative.

In order to maximize the benefits of work placements, students should always be prepared for work placements and offered preparative training. Training is also recommended for the employers and HEI staff members. By integrating practical training as part of the curricula and by providing more established internship programs and funding alternatives for students, more students are likely to take on work placements abroad. Also companies need to be encouraged to use more both local and international interns.

Participation in work placements abroad significantly contributes to students' personal and professional development. In many cases, participation in work placements abroad also influences students' future employment. However, it is not only the students who benefit from work placements but also other stakeholders involved. Practical training is a win-win situation for all, and the overall experience can be successful even though everything does not go as originally planned.

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Appendixes

1. Questionnaire

EU-VIP Questionnaire

Local state-of-the-art in international internship measures

This questionnaire is carried out in the framework of the EU-VIP project. EU-VIP is an acronym for Enterprise-University Virtual Placements. The project aims at enhancing the quality, efficiency and impact of international work placements by focusing on how to organize these placements, thereby boosting interaction between higher education institutions and enterprises and making advantage of the newest technologies. EU-VIP is a two-year project and it is funded with support from the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Program.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect information on the state-of-the-art of international internship measures in the EU-VIP partner organizations.

Any answers you give are confidential: nothing in the EU-VIP public reports will allow your institution to be identified without your permission. However, we ask you to give us your contact information, so that we can contact you later in case of questions.

Thank you for your collaboration!

Name of institution:

Country:

Number of students:

Contact person(s):

GENERAL INFORMATION

1) How does your institution define (international) internship?

2) Are internships made compulsory in your degree programs?
   - ☐ Yes.
   - ☐ No.
   - ☐ Other (please specify):

3) a. Do students earn credits for their internships?
   - ☐ Yes.
   - ☐ No.
   - ☐ Other (please specify):

   b. If you answered yes to the above question, please specify: how many credits do students usually earn?

4) What is the typical time and length for students in your institution to do their internships?

5) a. Do students get paid for their internships?
   - ☐ Yes.
   - ☐ No.
   - ☐ Other (please specify):

   b. If you answered yes to the above question, please specify: what is the typical intern salary?

6) a. Does your institution provide scholarships and grants for students taking on internship placements abroad?
   - ☐ Yes.
   - ☐ No.
   - ☐ Other (please specify):

   b. If you answered yes to the above question, please specify:
      i.   what kind of scholarships does your institution provide?
      ii. what are the terms and conditions?
      iii. how many students are entitled for the scholarships?
      iv. what is the typical amount of such scholarships?

7) How do students in your institution usually find their internship placements abroad and what is the university's role in the process?

8) How many students in your institution take on internship placements annually
      i. in their home country?
      ii. abroad?

9) a. How many students in your institution take on study abroad placements annually? Compare the number of outgoing exchange students with that of students taking on internship placements abroad.

b. What do you think is the reason for the difference?

10) a. Do students in your institution take on virtual internship placements (abroad) and/or real placements that include virtual experiences as part of the internship? Please give examples.
(A virtual internship is defined as one involving the use of an ICT supported environment, where students interact with each other and companies, independent of time and space, and across traditional geographical boundaries.)

b. How many students are involved in such placements?

11) Please describe how students evaluate and give feedback on their internship experiences.

SERVICES AND SUPPORT TO STUDENTS

12) The activities, procedures and services supporting students taking on internship placements abroad can be categorized under four phases, in which the nature of the activities may vary:

5. Preparatory phase: when a student starts to think about going abroad, search for information on possible internship placements, make application, etc.
6. Before the internship: when the student's application is approved and he/she starts to prepare for the actual internship
7. During the internship
8. After the internship: when the student has returned to his home institution

What initiatives does your institution take for students taking on internship placements abroad? You can list these activities in the following tables or give a free format description. Please describe also the service format (online, face-to-face consultation, flyers, etc.).

Phase 1: preparatory phase

PROVISION OF INFORMATION: providing fact-based information on work	COUNSELING: helping and advising students with their job-hunting problems (face-	PERSONAL GUIDANCE: providing long-term career guidance to students

PROVIDING FACT-BASED placements to students (e.g. websites, flyers)	to-face consultation, email, telephone, etc.)	

Please add more rows if needed.

Phase 2: before the internship

PROVISION OF INFORMATION: providing fact-based information on work placements to students (e.g. websites, flyers)	COUNSELING: helping and advising students with their job-hunting problems (face-to-face consultation, email, telephone, etc.)	PERSONAL GUIDANCE: providing long-term career guidance to students

Please add more rows if needed.

Phase 3: during the internship

PROVISION OF INFORMATION: providing fact-based information on work placements to students (e.g. websites, flyers)	COUNSELING: helping and advising students with their job-hunting problems (face-to-face consultation, email, telephone, etc.)	PERSONAL GUIDANCE: providing long-term career guidance to students

Please add more rows if needed.

Phase 4: after the internship

PROVISION OF INFORMATION: providing fact-based information on work placements to students (e.g. websites, flyers)	COUNSELING: helping and advising students with their job-hunting problems (face-to-face consultation, email, telephone, etc.)	PERSONAL GUIDANCE: providing long-term career guidance to students

Please add more rows if needed.

13) Please provide links to the existing public online services for students taking on internship placements abroad.

14) In your opinion, what are the procedures, services etc. in your institution requiring improvement in order to better serve the needs of students?

15) a. What are the most frequently asked questions from students taking on internship placements abroad and how are they answered?

b. Do the questions tell you something about the possible needs for improvement of procedures and services?

16) *Any other comments?*