

ONLINE INTERNSHIP IN EUROPE

How can virtual internships ensure meaningful work-based learning experiences?

WEBINAR REPORT

Challenges and opportunities of online internships were discussed at the ON-IT webinar on **Online Internship in Europe: How can virtual internships ensure meaningful work-based learning experiences?** held on 15 October 2021.

Organised in the framework of the Erasmus Days 2021, the event provided an overview of the ON-IT project, aimed at supporting the advancement of the online internship practice in higher education. It was also an occasion to officially launch the [report](#) on **Experiences of Virtual Internship in Europe** which includes some initial findings on online internships from a mapping exercise undertaken by the ON-IT consortium.

Director of UNIMED, **Marcello Scalisi** opened the webinar recognising the undeniable impact of COVID-19 on academic life and how it forced universities to quickly move towards digitalisation. “The entire academic community was able to survive in this online dimension, but very few opportunities have been seized with regards to online internships” he remarked, stressing the importance of the ON-IT project’s mission.

Presenting the main aims and focuses of ON-IT, coordinator **Gigliola Paviotti**, from the University of Macerata, described the outbreak of the pandemic as a moment of emergency, but also as an opportunity for universities to reflect beyond the emergency and think about the urgency to prepare students for a world increasingly shaped by digital transformation.

Cristina Stefanelli and **Federica De Giorgi**, from UNIMED, shared the results of the very first step in the ON-IT journey: a mapping activity of online internship experiences provided by EU universities during the COVID-19 lockdown. The survey, which culminated in the ON-IT report, gathered valuable insights on the main challenges and opportunities of online internships from the main actors involved: students, university supervisors, university career centres, and companies.

First-hand experiences of online internship were then shared in a panel discussion involving: **Nicoletta Bimbo**, International Relationships Coordinator at Red Visitar (Spain); **Jure Bulović**, student at the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management (Croatia); **Marion Catarina**, from the Montpellier Business School Career Center (France); and **Francisco J. García Rodríguez**, Professor at the University of La Laguna (Spain).

All these experiences underlined and shared from different points of view the challenges and the opportunities of a virtual internship. All the attendees agreed that students learned to interact at a distance and had a first taste of a real job. The most challenging issue was related to the lockdown period: in particular the student Jure Bulović admitted that it was difficult to stay motivated in the long run. At the same time, emphasis was placed on other positive aspects, such as the flexibility, the possibility to reach remote areas otherwise impossible to get to, the saving up of some money (hotels, flight tickets and visa).

Moderated by **Alessio Cavicchi**, Professor at the University of Pisa, the discussion acknowledged the increased relevance of online internships and their huge potential in terms of facilitating internationalisation and opportunities for students and companies in remote areas. However, the need was also recognised to develop further guidance and tools to ensure that online internships represent meaningful experiences for all the actors involved.

Finally, all attendees agreed that virtual internships cannot replace on site ones. They simply represent a further opportunity and maybe in the future, the blended internship -that combines both experiences- can be considered the most effective one. Indeed, it was underlined that there are some tasks that can be carried out virtually, while others are not replaceable.

Starting from these initial findings, in the coming months the ON-IT consortium will focus on developing and testing new resources and instruments that are hoped to improve the online internship practice.

Powerpoint presentations shared during the webinar are available [here](#).

About the ON-IT project

The ON-IT – Online Internship in Tourism project aims to develop a guidance framework and practical tools to design and implement quality online tourism internships in higher education. By actively engaging all actors involved in the internship experience, the ON-IT project focuses on equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to face the challenges of digital transformation in the labour market.

The ON-IT project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, and implemented by a consortium led by the [University of Macerata](#) (Italy) and including: [University of La Laguna](#) (Spain); [JAMK University of Applied Sciences](#) (Finland); [Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management of the University of Rijeka](#) (Croatia); [Montpellier Business School](#) (France); [Mediterranean Universities Union – UNIMED](#) (Italy); and [IGCAT](#) (Spain).

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