

Project: "Virtually the same thing as in-person internships? Mapping the virtual internship landscape and exploring intern and employer experience in the UK and Italy"

digital futures at work
research centre



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<https://digit-research.org/research/innovation-fund/mapping-the-virtual-internship-landscape/>

PARTNERS INVOLVED

Coordinator

The University Of Strathclyde (UK)

Partners

Oxford Brookes University (UK)

Univeristy Of Sussex (UK)

University Of Enna (IT)

Gran Sasso Science Institute (IT)

AlmaLaurea Interuniversity Consortium (IT) – member of Project Advisory Group

PROJECT SUMMARY

This project explores the growing but underresearched area of virtual internships through student intern and employer experience in two contrasting institutional contexts, the UK and Italy. Our aims are to map the key features of the virtual internship landscape and to compare digital to in-person internships on accessibility, skill development and employability for the intern, and on recruitment process and internship design/delivery for the employer. We propose an ambitious but achievable mixed-methods research design, involving (1) stakeholder interviews, (2) desk research, including secondary data analysis and (3) interviews with employers and student interns in both countries. Aligning with Digit priorities, we focus on the business services sector. This project will inform emerging research on the process and effectiveness of virtual internships and provide best practice guidance for students, employers and other stakeholders in developing successful virtual internships.

MAIN OBJECTIVES

To map key features of virtual internships in the UK and Italy; e.g. virtual internship providers/users, types of internships, who accesses them.

To explore how, if at all, virtual internships differ from in-person internships for interns, especially in terms of skills and knowledge development, organisational knowledge, and employability outcomes.

To explore how, if at all, virtual internships differ from in-person internships for employers, especially in terms of recruitment processes/decisions, developing candidate relationships and the design/delivery of internships.

To explore whether virtual internships are more accessible than in-person internships to students from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds.

To develop best practice guidance for interns, employers and HEIs, and to disseminate our findings at an impactful event;

To grow our research network on graduate transitions to employment by focusing on the experience of digital work to inform future research directions and apply for further funding.

Though not new, virtual (remote, online, or e-) internships have recently increased in popularity owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. *Virtual Internships* (an educational technology company) has seen their brokered internships increase from 200 a year in 2018 to 1600 a year in 2020 (anecdotal evidence from a preliminary conversation), and between a quarter to a half of UK students reported doing at least some of their work placements online in 2020 (Prospects, 2021; Holt-White & Montacute, 2020). Furthermore, new types of providers offer not only virtual internships, but also virtual work experience programmes (e.g. curated by Forage or The Bright Network), sometimes referred to as 'internship experiences'.

EXPECTED RESULTS

The project will bring positive change to virtual internships practice by informing students' decisions and employers' practices by:

Providing information to students, university placement offices and employers about the features of internships available and a better understanding of how virtual internships are viewed by employers, contributing to Digit objective 2 "maximise knowledge exchange and co-produced research with relevant communities".

Raising awareness about the extent to which virtual internships facilitate access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, contributing to the Widening Participation agenda.

Providing guidance about how virtual internships can be designed and delivered to improve accessibility. This guidance will be aimed at employers in the first instance.

Developing recommendations about how virtual internships can be designed and delivered in a way commensurate with the ILO Decent Work Agenda, without exploitation, through involving a range of non-academic end-users (identified in Section 3d) in the study.

CONTACTS

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