

QUALITY INTERNSHIPS

Paving the way for young people



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAPQI	Collective Awareness Platforms for Quality Internships
ECHE	Erasmus Charter for Higher Education
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ESN	Erasmus Student Network
EUF	European University Foundation
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IGP	Interns' Go Pro
ISEP	Instituto Superior de Engenharia do Porto
MS	Member State
STORY	Strengthening the Training Opportunities for InteRnational Youth
VET	Vocational Education and Training
YFJ	European Youth Forum

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INTRODUCTION

Internships can play a key role in the path to the labour market by providing an opportunity for students to bridge the skills gap between academic education and working life¹. In the past years, the EHEA has contributed to the ample growth of the internship market. More and more HEIs are designing their curricula including mobility windows and/or are encouraging undergraduates to conduct an internship. Additionally, the European Union has encouraged students to embark on a work-based learning experience abroad through one of its most well known mobility programmes, Erasmus+². Despite the increase in opportunities and awareness about the importance of internships during academic studies, the quality aspect has been largely ignored in the policy discussions at European level.

In 2013, the Eurobarometer study³ had shown the importance of tak-

ing immediate actions. Figures show that 59% of the interns were conducting unpaid internships, while 40% had no internship agreement and 30% of the internship schemes were reported as sub-standard with regard to learning content or working conditions. The CAPQI project has therefore created policy recommendations for all involved stakeholders, as well as a practical tool to improve the quality of internships. The tool consists of crowdsourcing internship reviews to create more transparency in the European internship market and allow young people to make well-informed choices regarding potential internship providers. Furthermore, the tool provides an incentive scheme for building employers' capacity and learning from good practices. The policy recommendations for HEIs, companies, civil society organisations, students, as well as the EU institutions strive to prompt a policy discussion

1 "7 out of 10 ex-trainees stated that their traineeship experience was useful in finding a regular job." European Commission, 2013, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1045&langId=en>

2 European Commission, Erasmus mobility for traineeship. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities/traineeships-students_en

3 European Commission, 2013, Traineeships: survey reveals shortcomings in working conditions and learning content. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-1161_en.htm

on the quality aspect of internships on all levels.

In the following document, we use the word “internships”. In some of the documents referred to, the word “traineeships” is used. In some cases, traineeships refer to someone being trained on the job that he/she is hired for, while internships are understood as a temporary position. However, this is not the case in the European-level policy discussions, as the two

words are often used interchangeably. To create consistency without judgment on the exact terminology, we use the word “internship” in the context of the CAPQI project, even though the Erasmus mobility version is usually called “Erasmus Traineeships”, implying that an internship should have a strong learning component.

1. QUALITY INTERNSHIPS: A MAPPING OF THE EXISTING INITIATIVES

The mapping and analysis of quality internship initiatives aim at presenting the different perspectives of actions and identifying the focus that has been given to the topic within the EHEA. According to our research, the projects that orbit around the topic of quality internships usually tend to fall under the following four categories: 1) raising global awareness, 2) informing stakeholders & policy innovation, 3) advocating for quality mobili-

ty internships & financial support, and 4) fostering employability & skill development. We have selected a few significant projects developed in the past few years that we believe are exemplary in order to present a brief overview of the European actions developed in line with the topic.

Raising global awareness

The project STORY, lead by ESN aimed at gathering the good prac-

tices regarding internship schemes in Europe, and Erasmus internships in particular. During the two-year lifecycle of the project, different activities and events were organised to raise global awareness on the quality of internships in Europe and disseminate the main results⁴. Following the investigation focused on topics such as accessibility, quality and recognition, the online platform erasmusintern.org was born to support students and graduates in finding international opportunities in the European job market. According to ESN, the platform hosts more than 10,000 unique offers each year and continues to extend its reach across Europe.

Another example of systemic impact while raising global awareness is the Europemobility initiative⁵. In the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme, partners from all over Europe decided to form an alliance to raise the quality and quantity of European work placements. Throughout the years, the Europemobility network has or-

ganised several International conferences (Paris, Brussels, Cagliari, Istanbul) and initiated Thematic Commissions covering the project's different areas and domains. As of today, the network's initiatives have helped to bring back to the table a number of interesting topics and issues such as the need for an European framework for quality internships schemes, a quality assurance framework and more.

Informing stakeholders & Policy Innovation

In 2010, YFJ has produced a European quality charter on internships and apprenticeships⁶ with the support of its partners. This key document is the result of a consultation process with partner organisations and stakeholders who decided to advocate for better quality standards for internships and apprenticeships while focusing on three main aspects: education, rights and remuneration. The charter serves as a basis to advocate towards institutions and employers and provide them with policy recommen-

4 Erasmus Student Network, 2014, Strengthening the Training Opportunities for International Youth, available at https://issuu.com/esnint/docs/esn_story_recommendations_booklet_w

5 Europemobility consortium, 2015, available at <http://www.europemobility.eu/index.php/2015/02/17/deliverables/>

6 European Youth Forum, European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships, available at <http://www.youthforum.org/european-quality-charter-internships-and-apprenticeships>.

dations and guidelines to upscale the quality of the internships.

A large number of projects are developed every year to address this specific issue. Even if we can find a lot of documentation to inform policy makers and companies, it is uncommon to find policy recommendations aimed at HEIs. Given that there is an increasing number of study programmes that entail a work-based experience in the form of internships, more attention should be given to supporting HEIs and their students with regard to work-placements.

Advocating for quality mobility internships and financial support

The International Interns' Day initiative, powered by IGP, advocates for boosting youth employment, including fair remuneration and learning content of internships. The project has brought together more than twenty-five leading actors in the field of youth and led to the creation of the Global Intern Coalition⁷, an international network aimed at improving work-

place rights for interns. The initiative finds large support and several events are held around the globe on this international day.

Fostering employability & skill development

The University of Fulda and the Institute Inter.research e.V. have worked jointly on two complementary initiatives that aimed at fostering employability among mobile students: Unikey and House of Brains (HoB). On the one hand, HoB enabled stronger university-business cooperation and a better match of students' skills provisions to the needs of enterprises by developing an internationally recognised online training fostering entrepreneurship⁸. On the other hand, Unikey⁹ developed entrepreneurial learning modules to accompany Erasmus interns' skill development and increase their employability.

ISEP has developed the PRAXIS¹⁰ platform, a one-stop-shop for students and graduates who would like to boost their employability

7 More information available at: <http://interncoalition.org>

8 More information available at: <http://www.hobplatform.com/site>

9 More information available at: <https://uni-key.eu/results.html>

10 More information available at: <http://www.praxisnetwork.eu/>

and find quality internships abroad. Students, companies and schools can find practical information that guide them through a quality assurance process for internships and support them in finding the best

match. ISEP's platform has been a success since its release in 2011 and everyday more students benefit from it to enhance their soft skills and employability.

2. AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF THE RELEVANT EU POLICIES

The analysis presented below looks at different EU policies regarding internships. Focus is on the European Parliament, however it also looks at documents from the European Commission. In addition, the YFJ's work on quality internships is briefly discussed. Although YFJ is not a policy-making body but an NGO with youth organisations as members, it is worth mentioning their work toward quality internships as they have been a key actor in the field throughout the years.

2.1. THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The European Parliament is the directly elected body in the European Union (EU) which, together with the Council of the EU, forms the legislative body of the EU. Unlike most national-level parliaments, the European Parliament does not have legislative initiative, which means that legislation proposals first must come from the European Commission.

In the recent years, the European Parliament's main text on quality internships is the one from April 2017. It presents a comprehensive view and conclusion on Skills Development and Employment: Ap-

prenticeships, Internships and Volunteering¹¹. This study, produced after the request of the EMPL Committee (European Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs), is a report and therefore not part of legislation. The following conclusions have been extracted from the report¹²:

- In a labour market characterised by weak labour demand, young people need to do something that will mark them out in the recruitment market.
- At European level work-based learning including apprenticeships, internships/traineeships and volunteering are positioned as important responses to combat youth unemployment and future skills mismatches.
- In order to arrive at quality apprenticeships, internships and volunteering schemes, challenges need to be overcome by policy responses, being accepted by all stakeholders (including employers' organisations and trade unions).
- Apprenticeship systems, compared with internships, tend to be well governed, ensure fair learning

and working conditions for apprentices and lead to formal qualifications and entry into the labour market. They do face difficulties in engaging employers and there can be issues related to low pay.

- Internships and volunteering are less regulated and offer less secure working and learning conditions for participants. The outcomes are less pronounced compared to apprenticeships. They are however an attractive opportunity both for employers and young people.
- Introducing, establishing, and developing apprenticeships, internships/traineeships and volunteering include a re-thinking of the sharing of responsibilities, costs and benefits between government, education providers, employers and individuals.
- There are societal risks associated with internships and volunteering. The concern is that they are not equally accessible to all, and that there are indications that they can lead to replacing regular (paid) employment and the misuse of qualified young people. Finally, it hints at a re-thinking of who(m) bears the costs for skills develop-

11 European Parliament, 2017, Skills Development and Employment: Apprenticeships, Internships and Volunteering, available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/602056/IPOL_STU\(2017\)602056_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/602056/IPOL_STU(2017)602056_EN.pdf)

12 See the full conclusions of the report at Annex I.

ment: the State, the employer, or – increasingly – the individual.

2.2. THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

The European Commission is the EU's institution for proposing legislation, implementing decisions and managing the day-to-day running of the EU. The Commission has written several texts on internships. The most recent text is a Commission Staff Working Document from October 2016 titled Applying the Quality Framework for Traineeships¹³. This document accompanies another Commission proposal, titled The Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative three years on.¹⁴

Applying the Quality Framework for Traineeships looks at internships and traineeships and the state of play in the member states, and their legislation with regards to the Quality Framework Traineeships. This topic is largely a member state competence and it is therefore important to relate to the existing member state legislation.

The document goes on to look at various aspects of internships, such as written agreements, working conditions, learning objectives and more. It concludes that while many member states have introduced legal changes during the last three years, there are many challenges remaining, namely: “insufficient learning content”, “lack of transparency on hiring practices”, “possibility of traineeships longer than 6 months” and “lack of rules on proper recognition of traineeships”. The poor quality of the learning content is a very important and consistent topic with what the YFJ mentions as the first point in their Quality Charter (see below). In comparison, the possibility of traineeships longer than six months seems to not be reported as an important issue, at least not for every stakeholder. In fact, within Erasmus+ Traineeship programme, it is possible to do a traineeship for up to twelve months.

13 European Commission, 2016, Applying the Quality Framework for Traineeships, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016SC0324&from=EN>.

14 European Commission, 2016, The Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Initiative three years on, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:%3A52016DC0646>.

2.3. THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

In 2013, the Council (not to be assimilated with the European Council or Council of Europe), has adopted a very important text, called Council Recommendation on a Quality Framework for Traineeships¹⁵. This specific piece of work has been referenced in the above-mentioned Commission's documents and outlines several recommendations to member states, most of them focusing on written agreements, learning objectives, working conditions and recognition (pp. 11-12) in line with traineeship schemes.

In addition, the Council of the EU has recently (March 2018) adopted the Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (2018/C 153/01)¹⁶. The document aims at "increasing the employa-

bility and personal development of apprentices and contributing towards a highly skilled and qualified workforce responsive to labour market needs". As the title indicates, this document focus on apprenticeships, which is different than internships/traineeships. It makes clear that apprenticeships are "formal vocational education and training schemes", which is different than the Higher Education internships which topic is apprehended by the CAPQI project.

2.4. THE EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM

The YFJ is an umbrella organisation of youth organisations in Europe, which have worked extensively on quality internships. Its most important contribution to the topic is the European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships¹⁷. This comprehensive document draws a list of recommendations that is used as a reference to evaluate the quality of internships.

15 Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on a Quality Framework for Traineeships, 2013, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52013PC0857>.

16 Council Recommendation of 15 March 2018 on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships, available at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1526484102559&uri=CELEX:32018H0502\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1526484102559&uri=CELEX:32018H0502(01))

17 European Youth Forum, European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships, available at <http://www.youthforum.org/european-quality-charter-internships-and-apprenticeships>.

The Charter includes the following articles¹⁸:

ARTICLE 1.

We are convinced that internships and apprenticeships should be primarily a learning experience and believe that:

- Internships/apprenticeships should never lead to job replacement;
- Well organised internships/apprenticeships help young people acquire practical experience and add practical skills to the knowledge and qualifications that have been previously acquired through either formal or non formal education;
- Internships/apprenticeships help to orientate oneself professionally and also widen one's perspectives of different sectors;
- Internships/apprenticeships provide recognised working experience that develops the skills of young people and elevates their professional capacity;
- Internships/apprenticeships should be carried out under guidance of a competent supervisor and have access to robust evalu-

ative and complaints channels to monitor progress and quality of the internship/apprenticeship experience;

- Interns/apprentices should be informed at the beginning of their internship/apprenticeship experience of their social and labour rights, workers representatives, their responsibilities to the organisation, any health and safety risks posed to them through the position or at the workplace and are provided the relevant social protection accordingly;

ARTICLE 2.

We believe that internships (as part of higher education) and apprenticeships should meet the following criteria:

- Existence of a written and legally binding contract between the educational institution, intern/apprentice and hosting organisation outlining the main principles of the internship/apprenticeship, including how many credit points this will contribute to the diploma of the intern/apprentice; a description of learning objectives and tasks should be attached to the contract;

¹⁸ The articles have been directly extracted from the above-mentioned European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships and therefore "we" is used throughout the text.

- Length and tasks of the internship/apprenticeship correspond to specific learning objectives that are shared with the student at the beginning of his/her internship/apprenticeship;
- Guidance throughout the internship/apprenticeship period by a supervisor(s) trained specifically for the role;
- The right of the intern/apprentice to receive reimbursement of costs incurred during the internship/apprenticeship or right to receive food, housing, and public transportation tickets instead; decent remuneration for work carried out additional to the requirements outlined in the internship/apprenticeship contract, including compensation for overtime; clear evaluation criteria of the internship/apprenticeship period.

ARTICLE 3.

We believe that internships taking place outside/after formal education should ideally not exist however where they exist they should meet the following criteria:

- Existence of a written and legally binding contract outlining the length, remuneration of the internship, a description of learning objectives and tasks should be attached to the contract;
- Decent remuneration not below the EU poverty line of 60 % median income or national minimum wage, if more favourable, in accordance to the tasks which are performed by the intern and to working hours (overtime should be additionally compensated). Internship remuneration should be regulated either in law or collective agreements in accordance with national practice;
- Use of internships should be limited to pupils, students and very recent graduates, length of internships period should be restricted to a reasonable and fixed number of months;
- Reimbursement of costs incurred during the internship;
- Inclusion of the intern in the social security system, especially those of health, unemployment, pension systems;
- Mid-term evaluation, discussion of the possibilities to be hired as a permanent employee during the internship period and a final evaluation at the end of the internship period;
- Limited number of interns per internship provider;
- Transparent advertising that includes a detailed task description and working conditions.

ARTICLE 4.

We urge the competent stakeholders to progressively develop the following support and monitoring policies for a better implementation of quality internships:

4.1. Legal framework and recognition of skills

- Internships should be given a place in the national legislation and employers should be provided assistance to any legal enquiries related to the implementation process;
- At the European level there should be mechanisms in place to promote the exchange of best practices in the area and the implication of the main criteria that define quality internships;
- National and European systems for certification and recognition of knowledge and skills acquired through internships should be in place to further support to smooth integration of young people in the labour market and support youth labour mobility.

4.2. Monitoring and statistics

- Statistics should be available on internships, nationally and at European level,

- with a special focus on: the number of internships available, the average length of internships, the social benefits being made available for interns, the allowances paid to interns, the age groups of interns;
- An overview should be available, nationally and at European level, on the different internship schemes and their place within the legal systems.

4.3. Partnerships

- National partnerships run between schools, universities, civil society organisations and the social partners should be encouraged and supported;
- More career development loans and investment in training by employers should be encouraged and supported;
- Schools should provide assistance to the young people when they are looking for a suitable apprenticeship.
- Student and pupil organisations, trade unions should be available to provide assistance to interns throughout the internship period.

2.5. CONCLUSIONS

It is remarkable to find common points among these documents issuing from different institutions

and slightly different backgrounds, over a timespan of several years. We highlight the following:

Learning experience

The learning content of internships can occasionally not be as enriching as it is supposed to be. Unqualified work, poor learning experience and repetitive tasks are too often problems that have been reported by interns. All actors seem to agree that focus should be on learning and interns should be given tasks that improve their skills, provide them with valuable experiences and prepare them for the labour market.

Written agreement

Most documents state that a written agreement is necessary in order to properly outline rights and responsibilities of both the interns and employers.

Duration

Several documents have recommended a maximum duration of six months for internships although it is sometimes pointed out that this duration is a point of reference and should be flexible whenever necessary. As seen above, Erasmus+ Traineeships can be extended to up one year.

Working conditions

The documents stress the importance of proper working conditions, namely regarding maximum working time, minimum resting time, holiday entitlements and more.

3. QUALITY INTERNSHIPS: IDENTIFIED OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS

The CAPQI project aims at providing a comprehensive overview of the current situation regarding quality internships and this entails an evaluation of the drawbacks that students face while conducting an internship abroad, as well as an identification of the employers' obstacles to implementing a quality internship scheme in their organisations. We have elaborated recommendations to provide stakeholders with concrete solutions.

3.1. THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

According to data collected from several Erasmus+ interns' reports¹⁹, the main issue students are facing is linked to the learning content quality of their internship. The majority judges it not challenging and/or empowering enough, while others point out that the tasks that they were given were over-

whelming. Both situations should be avoided by creating a more accurate overview of their responsibilities prior to the internship. The Erasmus+ Learning Agreement for traineeships includes a "detailed programme of the traineeship" section, although in many cases the learning programme does not provide sufficient information about the tasks assigned to the interns and/or does not necessarily fit the study-specific expectations of the students. The Erasmus Learning Agreement for traineeships should therefore be adjusted to include additional specific fields to make sure concrete tasks and assignments are explained and validated by all the parties prior to mobility, thus adding an extra layer of quality assurance to the work-based Erasmus mobility.

"Although the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) states that sending institutions should ensure that students received suf-

19 University of Fulda and Inter. Research. e.V., 2018, IO7 "Competence Development Portfolio for Interns/Trainees, CAPQI project.

ficient preparation for their mobility periods, 45% of respondents did not receive any.”²⁰ according to the ESNsurvey 2015. As holders of the ECHE, HEIs need to stand to their commitments and implement preparation meetings for all outgoing interns, potentially with the support of local student organisations. The financial support provided through the Erasmus+ programme should be used to facilitate those meetings. One could furthermore envision a compulsory learning module in which the students could receive a specific pre-mobility training to get crucial information in order to best prepare their mobility in a work environment. This module could potentially take the form of a blended training where both traditional and virtual learning contents are combined to boost students’ skills and awareness in the frame of an internship abroad. As seen above, a large number of resources can already be found online to train and prepare students on specific topics, such as entrepreneurship (elearning.uni-foundation.eu), language,

intercultural awareness and key situations of an internship abroad²¹.

Former interns have also reported that they lacked an appropriate introduction to the new working environment and/or were not being treated as an equal member of the team. Additionally, depending on the size of the host organisation and its resources, it is possible that one mentor supervises two or more interns. Even though this does not necessarily mean that the interns will not be able to conduct a quality internship, the more interns per mentor, the more chances that they will not receive a sufficiently personalised guidance throughout their internship. Frequently, this lack of appropriate supervision can lead to frustration. The integration of newcomers into the working environment of the receiving organisation is a cornerstone of the interns’ well-being and could potentially impact their productivity and motivation greatly. Organisations should receive more support to create quality internship schemes including appro-

20 ESNsurvey 2015, Local integration, economic impact and accompanying measures in international mobility. Available at <https://esn.org/esnsurvey/2015>

21 The Institute inter.research e.V. has developed, with the support of European funding, learning modules to prepare Erasmus+ trainees to key situations of the traineeship experience. See: https://eu.daad.de/medien/eu.daad.de.2016/dokumente/service/veranstaltungen/2017/mobilitaet/vorbereitung_auf_praktika_dingeldein_hands-on_learning.pdf

appropriate guidance. Multiple tools and guidelines are already available to companies and public institutions that would like to improve certain aspects of their internship programmes, such as CAPQI's guidebook implementation process for quality internships for employers²², a "Letter to the mentor" that aims at supporting the interns' supervisors²³ and the Council's guidelines on a quality framework for traineeships²⁴. These solutions should be further promoted within the Erasmus+ for traineeships framework and each sending institution should recommend them to the receiving organisation once a learning agreement has been signed. Moreover, an additional line to the Erasmus+ Learning Agreement for Traineeships could be foreseen to reinforce the receiving organisation's commitment towards the intern: "The Receiving Organisation/ Enterprise will guarantee appropriate supervision for the trainee".

3.2. THE EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVE

As presented in the Guide for implementation process of quality internships for employers²⁵, numerous organisations have reported issues related to training, mentoring skills, recognition, available resources and more. These factors tend to prevent high quality internships and can only be overcome if different stakeholder groups work together.

The "lack of guiding documents", "lack of training time and personalised guidance", as well as the difficulties encountered to ensure appropriate learning outcomes for each student result in a poor training experience for the students and a low return on investment for the hosting organisations. These hosting organisations should therefore take the time to draw up a detailed

22 More information available at: <http://www.capqi-project.eu/index.php/io4/>

23 More information available at: <https://eu-placements.de/index.php/info-for-enterprises>

24 Council, 2014, Council Recommendation of 10 March 2014 on a Quality Framework for Traineeships, available at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014H0327\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014H0327(01)&from=EN)

25 CAPQI consortium, 2018, Intellectual Output 4: Guide for implementation process of quality internships for employers, pp. 5-6.

internship scheme considering the quality indicators of internships²⁶. EU institutions are already providing support documents such as the Quality Framework for Traineeships as a “reference for quality offers of traineeships under the Youth Guarantee”²⁷ but should ensure that those guidelines reach potential host organisations to help them design an appropriate internship scheme.

In parallel, employers should encourage employees who act as tutors for interns to boost their mentoring/tutoring skills in order to best combine and satisfy the students’ and organisations’ needs when hosting interns. National and local authorities should provide solutions such as training or financial support to help them in the completion of those trainings. This way, a virtuous circle can be set for all stakeholders in order to overcome the “lack of resources” and the “lack of mentoring/training skills” identified.

Finally, the recognition is still a very important issue when it comes to student internships. In addition to the internship certificate repre-

senting a formal recognition of the student’s work-based learning experience, employers should make use of new technologies to fill the gap regarding the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. LinkedIn endorsements as well as the Open Badges system are two solutions that could be foreseen and should be generally more widely used by the employers and the general public.

26 As seen in the transparency at work (TAW) initiative and campaign. Available at https://www.transparencyatwork.org/about_us

27 European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1045&langId=en>

4. WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF QUALITY INTERNSHIPS?

4.1. LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE: TWO SCENARIOS

Work-based learning is increasingly part of higher education study programmes and consequently a new internship market has seen the light of the day. The three main stakeholders, HEIs, students and organisations (employers) are pivotal elements in the success of internships, however, they are facing new situations linked to the booming internship market and the difficulties that it brings. Given the fact that one out of four Erasmus+ mobile students are interns²⁸, and numbers keep growing, additional measures should be taken to ensure the quality of the mobilities for internships. Through the two following scenarios divided in immediate and forward-looking actions, we try to answer the challenges in line with quality internships.

A short-term perspective: immediate actions

When going abroad for an internship, students face many challenges. Whether the internship is embedded or not into the curriculum, students are often confronted with a lack of structure, guidance and qualitative information at an early stage of their planning process. It is important to underline the fact that it is a shared responsibility of all stakeholders to provide the students with quality information in order to best pave the way for a successful internship. Both the sending institution and the receiving organisations/enterprises play a key role in supporting students in the preparation of the internship at different stages. Apart from the guidance given to the students regarding administrative, financial or legal topics, it is also to be noted that the housing issue is one of the greatest obstacles to mobility and therefore requires special atten-

28 Erasmus+ annual report, European Commission, 2016, p. 31. Available at <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/49350560-0d56-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

tion. Building upon the findings and recommendations of the HousErasmus+ final report²⁹ published in 2017, the public and private sectors should take stock and develop solutions for their students and learners.

Additionally, HEIs should further intensify their intra-institutional collaboration and communication to ease the exchange of information between the key bodies responsible for business relations, internships and mobility. Stronger ties between the aforementioned bodies would improve the chances for students to receive appropriate and homogeneous guidance throughout the different steps of the internship mobility process and directly impact the quality of their internship experience.

Another step that could lead to a better and fairer internship market for students would be to raise a broader awareness on the unpaid internship situation and further advocate for quality paid internship schemes. It is in the interest of the

public and private sectors to invest resources into a fair remuneration for the students to ensure the principle of equity, or in other words that all students have equal access to student internship mobility opportunities. Already now, a lot of different European, national and local initiatives are fighting against the worldwide unpaid internship situation. More financial support should be given to civil society organisations that work towards this goal, especially student organisations that are widely spread across Europe and maintain good relations with the higher education and business sectors.

Forward looking vision: major steps

According to the research results of the HousErasmus+ project, “trainees also turn more often to friends and personal contacts than do students that embark on a study mobility”³⁰ and “...trainees report more challenges to find affordable and decent housing, underlining the fact that not having a receiv-

29 European University Foundation and Erasmus Student Network, 2017, HousErasmus+ Research Report, available at https://houserasmus.eu/sites/default/files/HE%2B_Final_Research_Report.pdf

30 Ibid, p. 69.

ing HEI creates additional barriers.”³¹The two key findings presented above are just a few out of many that support the fact that an Erasmus mobile student for study and an Erasmus student for internship may experience their mobility differently in terms of integration in the local community, personal experience, housing issues and more. Apart from reinforcing the ties between the students and their home HEIs, one solution could be to give more importance to the role of local student organisations in the active support of the incoming internship students. Given the fact that “60% of students agree that ESN activities helped them integrate into their host environment.”³² we believe that student associations should be generally receive more financial support to continuing achieving those goals with a greater impact.

The STORY project highlighted that “In many HEIs, students do not have the possibility to top up their traineeship grant (35%). In

other HEIs income from the receiving organisation (28%), national grants (23%) and additional grants (17%) help students finance their traineeship abroad.”³³ Considering the fact that the financial issue is still one of the core obstacles to mobility³⁴, the opportunities for the students to be offered top-up grants to cover the extra costs in their host country should be multiplied. In the current state of things, national top-up grants are given to outgoing students, although there would be a need for a national/regional financial support system for the incoming students as well. It is in the interest of the national and local authorities to ensure foreign interns have sufficient resources to be able to fully contribute to the benefit of the local organisations and economy, and the society at large. The shared responsibility of all stakeholders is key to quality internships.

In parallel, EU institutions should take the next step and enhance the calculation system of Erasmus+

31 Ibid, p. 69.

32 Erasmus Student Network, ESNsurvey, 2015, available at <https://esn.org/esnsurvey/2015>

33 Erasmus Student Network, STORY desk research, p. 13.

34 “More than 57% of non-mobile students consider financial issues to be the most important obstacle for mobility.”, ESNsurvey, 2014, International Experience and Language Learning, available at <https://esn.org/ESNSurvey/2014>

grants. Over the past years, many studies and policy papers underlined the fact that the simplicity of the Erasmus+ grant system is an obstacle to its efficiency. Different options exist to give the system more accuracy when it comes to calculating the amount granted for the students on mobility. The Erasmus+ first year review, focused on student mobility, urges the EU

stakeholders to consider “one of the following two sources of information:

- Cost of living estimates produced by all HEIs that comply with ECTS guidelines.
- NUTS 2 living cost statistics, which provide regional information across all of Europe.”³⁵

4.2. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Mobility for internships: practicalities and recognition

1. As a key element to student mobility, all parties (sending HEIs, host organisations and students) should sign the learning agreement (LA) prior to departure. Additionally, students and HEIs should use the Online Learning Agreement (OLA) tool to reduce the administrative workload entailed by student mobility. The OLA, initially developed for student mobility for studies, will encompass new features that enable mobile students to fill

in their learning agreements for internships.

2. After the mobility, all mobile students for internshipship should receive, in addition to the internship certificate, an additional paragraph in the diploma supplement acknowledging the internship’s learning outcomes and valorising their professional experience abroad. Moreover, HEIs and organisations should make use of new technologies as a way of recognition, such as Open Badges.

3. The use of matching platforms for students and potential host or-

35 European University Foundation and Erasmus Student Network, Erasmus+ 1st year review: student mobility, 2015, p. 4. Available at http://uni-foundation.eu/system/files/erasmus_1_year_review.pdf

organisations such as erasmusintern.org should be further developed within the career centers and/or the specific bodies in charge of student employability at HEIs.

4. Generally, career services bodies should use the TAW plug-in developed through the CAPQI project to empower students to proactively search a host organisation for their internship.

5. The European tools for validation of the competences and recognition for the students such as Europass should be generally more recognised by the general public and employers.

Funding of student mobility for internships

1. The European Commission should take stock of the suggestions for upgrading the calculation system for Erasmus+ grants and adapt it accordingly for the next Erasmus+ programme. Additionally, all students should receive their grant payments, at least partially, before the beginning of their mobility period to ease their arrival.

2. National and regional authorities should offer top-up grants to interns (outgoing and incoming)

based on socioeconomic criteria to ensure that the mobility experience is not socially exclusive.

3. Host organisations/enterprises should remunerate the mobile interns fairly for their work. In addition, it would be beneficial to start initiatives at European level to come to an agreement on principles of remuneration involving Social Partners (i.e. find agreement in the Councils Recommendation on a Quality Framework for Traineeships when it comes to the remuneration of interns).

Improving mobility for internships

1. All HEIs should hold information sessions on internships. Considering the ECHE principles and the increasing number of mobility windows, it should be compulsory for HEIs to make sure that all students are aware of the Erasmus+ opportunities.

2. Student organisations should be a part of the students' experience when on mobility for internship. Bearing in mind the positive impact that they can have regarding the integration of the students in the host country, HEIs and/or host organisations should

ensure that mobile interns are informed about them.

3. A quality charter for employers should be available to all host organisations/enterprises who would like to improve and/or assess their performance on different criteria linked to the experience of the mobile intern. Such a voluntary commitment to offering quality internships should be recognised publicly through a reward system such as for example a label for top employers.

4. EU institutions should generally improve the knowledge base on work-based learning. In the framework of this study, the following gaps have been detected: lack of a common definition that can be applied in gathering statistical information on participation (analysis based on national sources using national definitions), lack of data available that can be used to evaluate more precisely the participation in internships over the years, lack of comparative data on employment outcomes of apprenticeships and internships, lack of identification of cases of systematic misuse of work-based learning (i.e. cheap labour, replacing regular employees). Further studies about the issue of unequal access to ap-

prenticeships, internships and volunteering and the impact of this on transitions into the labour market should be undertaken.

Concluding remarks

This document gives a comprehensive overview of the current policy focus regarding the quality of internships in Europe. Quality internships' blocking factors as well as identified solutions have been presented to keep the stakeholders informed about the situation and provide them with concrete recommendations on different levels. Therefore, we urge all stakeholders – companies, HEIs, EU institutions, civil society organisations as well as students – to take actions to improve the quality of internships.



Annex I - European Parliament report Skills Development and Employment: Apprenticeships, Internships and Volunteering - Full conclusion

Conclusion 1

In a labour market characterised by weak labour demand, young people need to do something that will mark them out in the recruitment market.

Young people have been hit harder by the economic crisis than older people and they face more difficulties entering the labour market. These difficulties can have scarring effects on their future careers and lives. In order to avoid these effects, young people can get in-

involved in alternative schemes to bridge the gap between the world of education and the world of work. These can be apprenticeships, internships/traineeships and volunteering schemes.

Conclusion 2

At European level work-based learning including apprenticeships, internships/traineeships and volunteering are positioned as important responses to combat youth unemployment and future skills mismatches.

At European level and national level, apprenticeships receive substantial policy attention; apprenticeships are mentioned in many European level policy frameworks. In many countries the reform of VET systems includes either the creation of apprenticeship programmes or significantly increasing the number of apprentices. Internships/traineeships are high on the policy agenda as well as being evident in the Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Initiatives. Finally, volunteering received attention through the European Year of Volunteering (2011) and the European Charter for Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers (2014). In these policy initiatives emphasis is put on the role these schemes can play in the skills development on young people to provide them an entry point in the labour market.

Conclusion 3

In order to arrive at quality apprenticeships, internships and volunteering schemes, challenges need to be overcome by policy responses, being accepted by all stakeholders (including employers' organisations and trade unions).

The study identified a number of challenges related to work-based learning that will have to be pro-

vided solutions for, to establish systems that provide a safe position for participants in companies and organisations and that secure a quality learning environment. The quality frameworks that are developed at EU-level do include the aspects needed to work on these challenges, but also leave open specific issues because no agreement can be reached between the social partners at European level on key issues related to quality frameworks for apprenticeships and open-market internships. This concerns the issue of payments for apprenticeships and internships and the contract form for apprentices. It would help if quality frameworks can be agreed upon by the main stakeholder and provide clear guidelines on what is considered a quality apprenticeship and internship.

Conclusion 4

Apprenticeship systems, compared with internships, tend to be well governed, ensure fair learning and working conditions for apprentices and lead to formal qualifications and entry into the labour market. They do face difficulties in engaging employers and there can be issues related to low pay.

Compared with internships, ap-

prenticeships are better regulated, and require a high level of commitment from employers to deliver skills training. Employers need to commit themselves to a long-term apprenticeship pathway; need to comply with different quality standards; conduct administrative duties and need to ensure that the learning outcomes are delivered. The employers are, especially in times of economic uncertainty, sometimes hesitant to make this commitment, without there being additional support (financial or other kinds). Despite the high level of policy attention, participation in apprenticeships is not increasing in many Policy Department A: Economic and Scientific Policy 78 PE 602.056 Member States. Although systematic misuse is not found in the study, there are issues with low pay of apprentices. Furthermore, there are indications that apprenticeships have considerable numbers of drop-outs (the completion rate is between 50 % and 85 %).

Conclusion 5

Internships and volunteering are less regulated and offer less secure working and learning conditions for participants. The outcomes are less pronounced compared to apprenticeships. They are however

an attractive opportunity both for employers and young people.

In relation to the internships and traineeships, the situation is different compared to apprenticeships, leading also to different types of difficulties. Internships are seen as an attractive opportunity, also covering more often higher education levels. They can be part of an education programme, are popular ALMP for labour market integration of unemployed, but they can also take place in an open market as based on an agreement between an employer and an individual. These types of internships are seen by employers as a probation period for potential new employees and participants see them as an entry point to the labour market. Internships, however, are also seen a source of cheap labour for employers and lack of job-openings can 'force' young people into a series of unpaid internships. A factor that contributes to why the internship model is often applied is that they usually do not come with a high level commitment from the employer or the intern: they are short term, are largely unregulated regarding the employer's commitment to the intern, and have limited administrative burdens. In times of economic stand-still and labour

markets in which young people have difficulties finding jobs, internships are a cost-efficient means for employers to recruit new staff (i.e. almost a trial period to see if the intern fits in with the company, and also relatively low cost labour (so long as employers can harness the productive contribution of the intern). Volunteering as a way of skills development and improving one's chances in the labour market relies on the individual willing to invest time and volunteers need to be able to financially support themselves.

Conclusion 6

Introducing, establishing, and developing apprenticeships, internships/traineeships and volunteering include a re-thinking of the sharing of responsibilities, costs and benefits between government, education providers, employers and individuals.

The emphasis on the role of the skills development schemes is increasing in Europe and its Member States and these schemes rely on close collaboration between education providers and employers more than the school-based skills development schemes. This also means sharing responsibilities and sharing costs and benefits between

them. Introducing apprenticeships evokes debates on what the role and contribution is of companies in achieving the stated learning outcomes, how to guarantee the quality in the work-place learning, and in what way do employers contribute in terms of funding in particular in cases where apprentices are poorly paid. For internships and volunteering, the investments for skills development shift even more to the individual in cases where the internship is unpaid or poorly paid (volunteering is by definition unpaid).

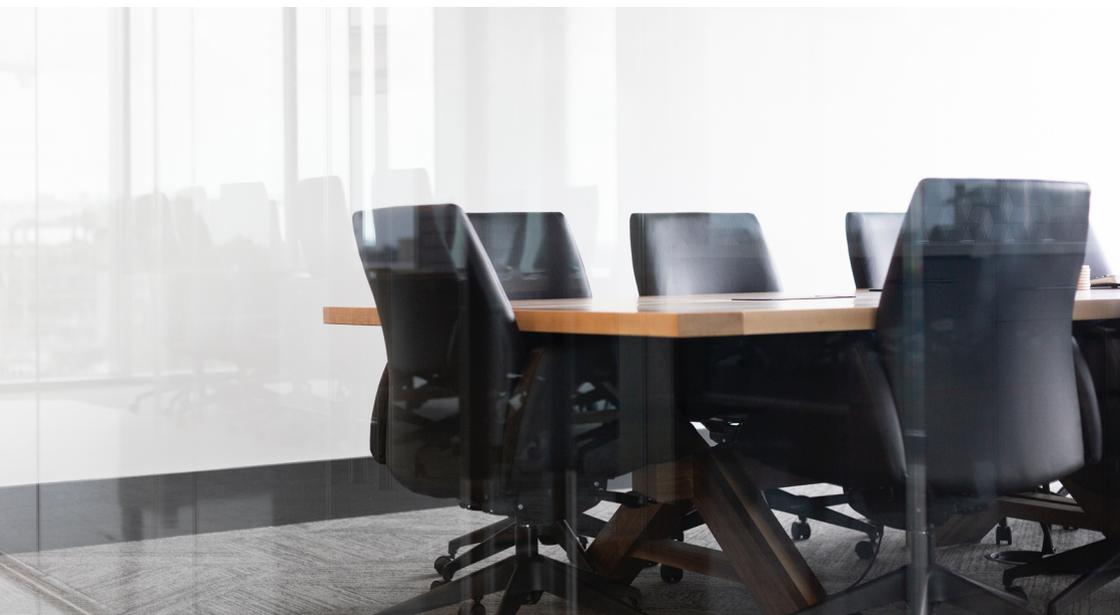
Conclusion 7

There are societal risks associated with internships and volunteering. The concern is that they are not equally accessible to all, and that there are indications that they can lead to replacing regular (paid) employment and the misuse of qualified young people. Finally, it hints at a re-thinking of who(m) bears the costs for skills development: the State, the employer, or – increasingly – the individual.

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As internships are usually unpaid or poorly paid, the externalisation of costs for skills development in

a particular occupation shifts from education providers, to employers, and finally to the individual. In order to obtain the skills the labour market demands the individual is pushed into making the investment in these skills in the absence of other means through which they might acquire them. Investments concern working in the organisation and contributing to the productivity and covering living costs by other means than wages of remunerations. In relation to volunteering a similar shift can be seen as for the internships, the costs for skills development are borne by the individuals as no payments or remunerations are foreseen. The shift in who is responsible for covering the costs of skills development comes with a price: skills development is

becoming less accessible for people from economically less advantaged backgrounds. Although skills development in the form of internships and traineeships are an important stepping stone into employment; people with less financial means face more difficulties entering the labour market. People who can afford to self-fund their living costs for a period of time have a better chance to take up volunteering and internships and thereby improve their attractiveness to employers. There are indications that especially for internships ('open-market internships'), that young people are replacing paid employment, or that employers make use of interns on a systematic basis without offering employment opportunities after completing the internship.



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