

# Virtual Internship Toolkit



What works: Conducting Impactful  
Virtual Internships as a Civic  
University

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# OVERVIEW

Over the last year, many internships have been virtually based. Social distancing restrictions as a result of the pandemic have been the main cause of this, and therefore it is fundamental to adapt to these changes. Learning from students, employers and external partners is vital to the development of future virtual internships. Remote working is likely to remain part of our working life, and therefore City-REDI strived to make this a more meaningful and impactful process by creating a toolkit designed to help the future of working virtually. This toolkit is an outcome of research conducted over the past year, listening to the voices of students, employers, and external partners in regard to their experiences with conducting internships virtually.

The toolkit highlight 'what works' when conducting virtual internships with internal and external partners. The toolkit will evidence 'what works' from the experiences of conducting virtual internships (conducted in a 'working from home' style, rather than face-to-face) from: City-REDI/WMREDI; Birmingham Business School; School of Geography, Earth, and Environmental Sciences (GEES); Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences (LANS); and Careers Network.



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# What is the Virtual Internship Toolkit?

- Virtual internships, conducted online, became mainstream from the start of the pandemic. However the University of Birmingham had undertaken virtual internships prior to the pandemic, with the **aim of removing time, cost, travel, and other similar barriers for students, staff, and opportunity providers alike**. During the pandemic, this approach to internships came into its own. And is **here to stay**.
- This toolkit takes the **experiences of virtual internships** from 30 students, staff from Birmingham Business School, Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, and Careers Network, and small businesses to **support the conducting of virtual internships in the future**.
- The toolkit builds on the work of the [Virtual Internship Programme](#), [Student Knowledge Exchange Project](#), and the [Year in Civic Leadership](#) work at the University of Birmingham.



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# MEET THE TEAM



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# BUSINESS SECTION

1. **Benefits and Challenges**
2. **Interns contributions to businesses**
3. **Themes**
  - a. Onboarding
  - b. Application/Advert
  - c. Communication
  - d. Compensation
4. **Staff Career Progression**
5. **Best Practices**



# BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

## **Some of the benefits highlighted include:**

- Virtual internships are convenient and saves time of travelling for businesses.
- It enhances productivity and creativity as interns are not under pressure to deliver when working from home and the environment is relaxing.
- It provides access to a productive and resourceful youth population that are bright, educated, thoughtful, and hardworking and are best suited to work with 'Gen Z'.
- Spreading out virtual internships as part-time allows for flexibility and is less demanding for businesses to effectively manage.
- It provides the opportunity for working mothers to take up interns virtually.

## **Although these are challenges highlighted by businesses, solutions to addressing these were also provided.**

- There is sometimes difficulty in keeping track of work done by interns which could result in excess time spent on one activity. This can be mitigated by having a time log to track the tasks performed hourly.
- The short duration of virtual internships can be a challenge, however, businesses can take up at least two interns for more impact, different skillset and support for each other.
- Poor internet connection and other technical aspects is a challenge. However, this can be mitigated by using technology tools such as google documents, google drive to store documents and sorting in different folders.



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# INTERNS CONTRIBUTION TO BUSINESSES

- Content creation skills with a millennial focus and insights that older staff do not have.
- New evidence-based techniques and fresh skillsets that students learned from the university such as in therapy.
- Research bringing not only an academic understanding of what the business was targeting but also had the intuition to go out there and talk to real people. The research was well documented, well thought through, and well-reasoned arguments.
- Digital marketing skills such as creation and management of business social media platforms, content creation, writing blogs for websites, conducting analytics and measuring social media outcomes.
- Networking on behalf of the business through business group networks and meetings. This was beneficial to both the business and interns as interns built their contacts and first-hand experience of the business world. These networking and business meetings were done mostly online.



*“We've had students who've done marketing plans for startup companies who haven't got a permanent marketing person. We've had business development interns who've developed a business plan for a small business students who've worked for charities developing fundraising campaigns and social media campaigns”*



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# THEME 1: ONBOARDING



- To have enough time for onboarding, internships should be at least 150 - 200 hours.
- A 15 minutes training for business managers on virtual internship and all it entails should be provided virtually or using a video.
- Set up an onboarding process that provides an orientation for the interns on the first day of work.
- Businesses can provide interns access to online training platforms e.g LinkedIn learning that equip them with basic skills like editing and social media management.
- There should be a set time of work, for instance, half nine to half five.
- It is key to have regular check-ins including one-to-ones and group sessions with the interns. The one-to-ones allowed for in-depth discussions about their personal lives while the group sessions focused on the outcomes and results of their tasks.



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# THEME 2: APPLICATION/ADVERTS

- The University should make timelines for application process available and clear to businesses.
- Business managers need to know when applications are open, results will be out, and decisions are to be made. They shouldn't be buried in the texts of emails amidst dozens of emails received every day which makes it easy to miss.
- Businesses should take control of the application process by arranging interviews, but the applications coming in before that and adverts sent out should be managed by the university.
- An alternative to generic applications of CV and Cover letter could involve students doing a “small worthwhile task” as part of the application process which is more time-saving.
- The University should provide support for students in terms of how they interview and the whole application process.



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# THEME 3: COMMUNICATION



- Communication which is not just about words and facial expressions but the whole body communication is critical for successful internships. Hence, in conducting virtual internships, alternatives need to be provided because communication is going to be compromised. This includes managers being very clear about what to expect from the interns, providing more explanations with more depth, being a lot more sensitive, and check in to make sure the interns understand their tasks.
- It is also important for the manager to be approachable as working virtually requires managers to give the impression that the interns can talk to them if they have got concerns or questions.
- There are different mediums of communication that can be explored by businesses. These could be LinkedIn messaging, text messaging, phone call and email.



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# THEME 4: COMPENSATION



- Interns should be compensated for hours worked and this is not limited to only financial compensation.
- Interns do get paid through the university and businesses are also open to paying interns.
- Asides from monetary benefits, there are value-added benefits that can be shared with students to motivate them to be committed and take up internships. This could be work experience that looks good on their CV, acquiring a bit of understanding about how businesses work and where opportunities arise, a potential long-term job.
- Students need to understand that this not free labour, there are benefits they get such as networking in the business world and building a LinkedIn profile.
- Students need to learn to share everything they have done - reflect on their experience and acquire lots of transferable skills that they can show off as part of skill development.



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# STAFF CAREER PROGRESSION

**Virtual internships support staff career progression by providing opportunities for line management and mentoring. They include:**

- It's a learning experience for both the line manager and intern. The managers upskill themselves by investing in the interns emotional, mental and physical development as well as achieving their goal.
- Line managers supporting the interns motivate them to put in more time and effort in their work which enables the manager meet their deliverable and achieve their set goals.
- It enables line managers improve their learning, communication, relationship building and mentoring skills. The University could support this by offering a half-hour session to prospective managers on how to get the best out of their interns, communicate with them, engage them and make themselves approachable.
- Mentoring interns and articulating their roles helps businesses to articulate their priorities and provides clarity of purpose.
- Small businesses have fewer staff and directors and this enables them to acquire skills in line management, especially with remote work which they didn't have and was new for them.
- It enables business staffs to find out what works for remote working through testing and thought processes involved in managing an intern.
- It equips staff with the ability to be flexible considering the intern's university work and exam times. The interns are given some weeks off which they make up for at the end of the internship by giving extra hours or moving tasks around to make it a lot easier for them.



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# Pay and a Real Living Wage

- Importance of paid internships - for businesses and for students.
- Pay a Real Living Wage (independently calculated by the Living Wage Foundation based on the cost of living)
- <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/>
- Not to be confused with the UK Government's "National Living Wage" which is based on a % of median earnings (and only applies to people aged 23 and over so does not often include students esp. undergraduates)
- <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>



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# RESOURCES

- Internships and placements - <https://worksmithhr.com/internships-and-placements/>
- Forage - <https://www.theforage.com/>
- Virtual internships - <https://www.virtualinternships.com/>
- Rate My Placement - <https://www.ratemyplacement.co.uk/virtual-internships>
- Lessons from virtual internships - <https://www.dcu.ie/leadership-talent-virtual-internships/toolkit-download>
- Arts and Humanities Remote Internship Toolkit - [https://www.umass.edu/aes/sites/default/files/assets/aes/remote\\_internship\\_toolkit.pdf](https://www.umass.edu/aes/sites/default/files/assets/aes/remote_internship_toolkit.pdf)
- National Careers Service UK - <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/careers-advice/how-to-find-a-virtual-internships>
- University of Birmingham Careers Network - <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/employability/careers/contact/index.aspx>



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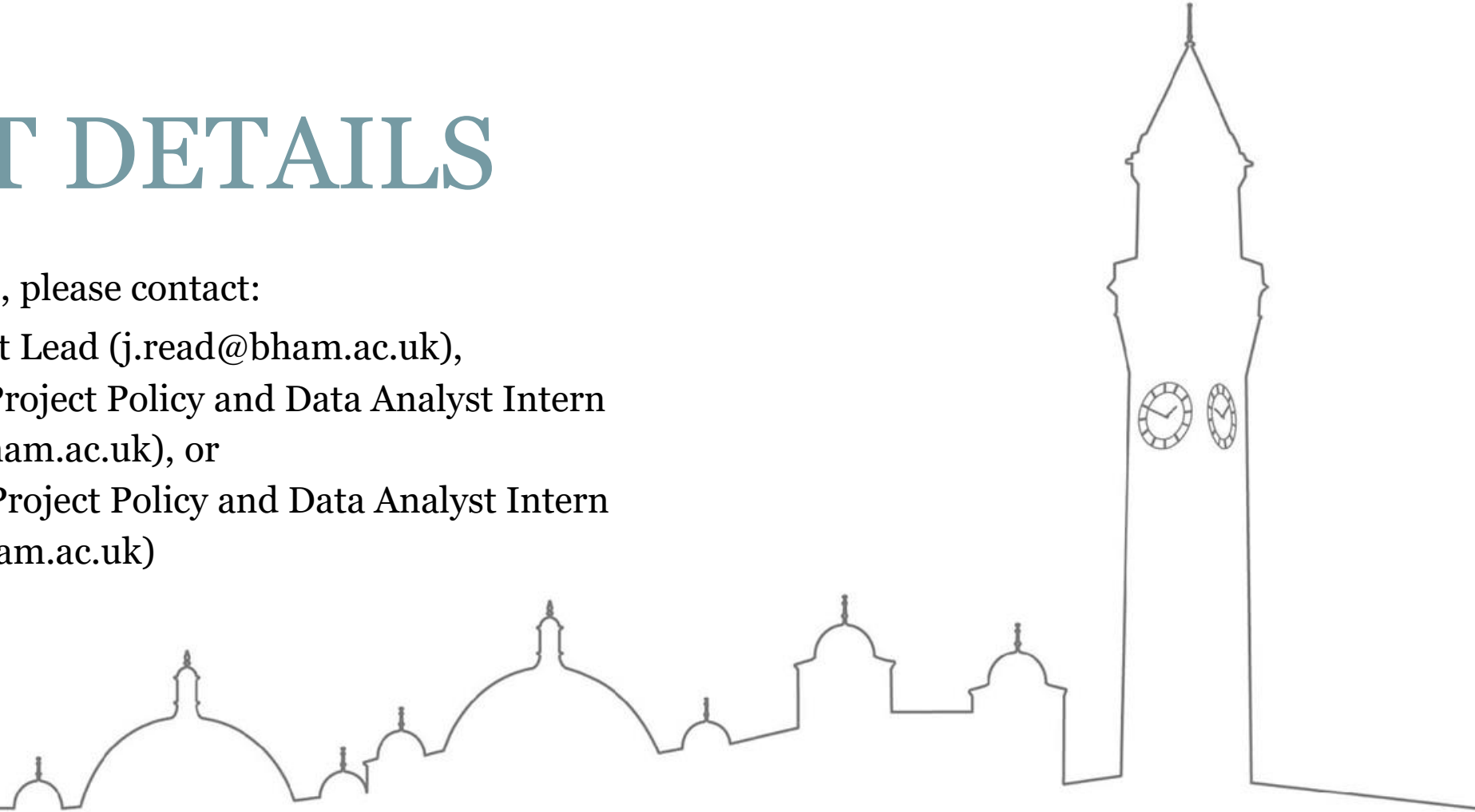


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