Virtual Internship Toolkit: Staff version

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.

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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STAFF SECTION

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2. **Sources of Virtual Internship**
3. **Themes**
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   c. Monitoring & Evaluation
   d. Advert/Promotion
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BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

There are several benefits staffs highlighted:

- Virtual internships are easy to set up and cheaper in cost as it is very affordable for departments to put in place.
- It promotes engagement with different organisations, placement providers, and charities abroad which would not have been easily accessible.
- It increases the number of organisations placement teams have access to for students to take on internships.
- It facilitate accessibility, especially to persons who would not have been able to such as people with caring responsibilities.
- It offers more flexibility for staffs with time commitments and other responsibilities surrounding their role.
- It allows for the enhancement of digital skillsets and utilising platforms in virtual environment that staff perhaps haven't utilised previously.

The challenges highlighted by Staff which the toolkit provides insights on ways this can be mitigated include:

- Interns sometimes place more importance and value on in-person internships than virtual internships. They attach virtual internships to the pandemic ignoring the benefits it provides. Some of the benefits include breaking down accessibility barriers and the opportunity of working abroad.
- Some interns don't consider it "real work" because there are no tangible aspects even though that might not be the case.

SOURCES OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP

- Organisations including non-governmental organisations, consultancies, charities, community groups, local councils, and bigger organisations can provide virtual internships. Although, most of the civic engagement type internships (charities and NGOs) are done virtually while the bigger organisations in Birmingham are in person.

- Students can also source their own internships which enable students to take up opportunities in organisations both at home and abroad.

- University departments source placements that are done during the semester (one day per week) that offer the option of doing some online as well as in person.

- Virtual internships can also take the form of the hybrid model. This works well too as it allows for physical interactions such as coffee once a month in the office, lunch outings, etc where possible.

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THEME 1: ONBOARDING/INDUCTION

- Virtual internships require an onboarding/induction for the interns and staff. The training should be inclusive of data sharing, where to store data and general data protection regulation (GDPR) which are essential when doing things online. Virtual internships are more online – so focus training on the potential threats and security of doing things online.

- There is need for training and support provided to interns and staffs, especially new businesses on establishing structures when it comes to virtual internships.

- The university and placement organisations need to work together in putting in place scaffolding (structure) to ensure that students who are interning and staffs managing interns don't get lost in delivering their tasks.

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THEME 2: LINE MANAGER/MENTOR

- Virtual internships provide staffs with the opportunity for line management experience which is beneficial. Although managing interns require extra time, in the long run it was more productive as interns could eventually be left to their own accord and in return make up for the time lost.
- Line managers should avoid micro-managing the interns. However, line managers have to make sure interns know what they're doing to be able to eventually transfer ownership and responsibility to them. To do this, they have to put aside time so that they can have contact with the interns whether that be at the start or end of the day. In the long run, although time consuming this is more productive.
- Training courses for staffs prior to commencing line management responsibilities will be beneficial.

THEME 3: MONITORING & EVALUATION

- It is crucial to monitor and evaluate virtual internships, although this can be challenging, it's important.

- Staffs should keep track of how students are getting on with the placement or internship. This could be a structured checking system where the students submit a weekly reflection (a paragraph of how they are getting on).

- Monitoring and evaluation helps placement organisations identify what is needed to ensure that interns and line managers are providing what is expected (managing the expectations).

- It is recommended to have "structure 1-to-1" that allow for reflection especially with placements sourced by the students.

THEME 4: ADVERTS/PROMOTION

- Virtual internships should be co-created between the employer and the academics as it will help provide the opportunity for students to have a structured external engagement in their degree programme.
- The university should leverage in-person promotional channels and place virtual internships side-by-side with in-person internships and not at the bottom, it's not a competition of which is better has both have their benefits and value.
- The university Careers network has a vacancy portal called "careers connect" that is used to advertise opportunities and for employers to promote their positions as well. They also use canvas and newsletters for certain courses, schools or departments.
- Virtual internships should be promoted with the same medium used for in-person internships. The job descriptions should highlight the benefits of the roles and activities the students would be engaged in and the impact they would make.

"I would love to see more virtual internships embedded into the curriculum"

"I think it is utilising the promotional channels that work most effectively to raise awareness of these roles in the same way that we would for physical opportunities"

Promotion through Canvas to certain courses, or certain schools or departments. And similarly utilising kind of newsletter outputs, as well to certain, you know, courses and schools and departments as well"

THEME 5: INTERN MANAGEMENT

> *"to manage these virtual internships, when talking with organisations its important to almost build in smaller milestones that are easily reachable to give the students a sense of accomplishment, and therefore confidence boost"*

- Virtual internships require effective communication between staffs and interns on expectations.
- Employers have highlighted that they could not have done some of their work without the intern, thereby laying emphasis on the need for communication so that interns can complete the work alongside their degrees with minimal stress.

- Virtual internships improves the quality of work given to interns. This is due to staffs been more thoughtful about the project work that they set for the interns because they know they will not have access to them everyday, staffs need to pre-plan what they're going to ask them to work on.
- Line managers should set smaller milestones that are easily reachable to give the interns a sense of accomplishment which would help build their confidence.
- It is important to create a sense of community among students taking up virtual internships to foster a sense of belonging.

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Pay and a Real Living Wage

- Importance of paid internships - for businesses and for students.s
- 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

RESOURCES

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
- 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

CONTACT DETAILS

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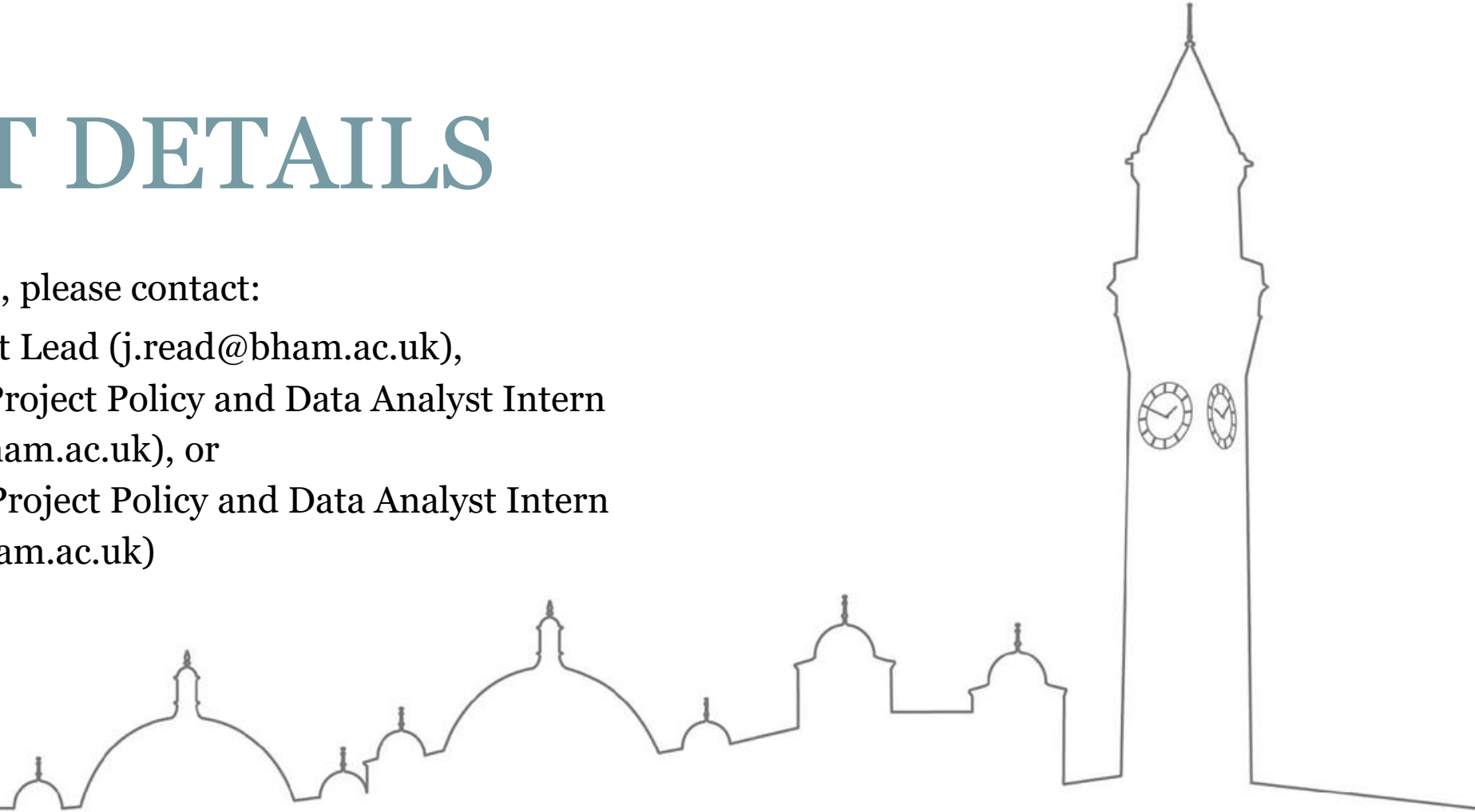
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