



Event on Education

Is your life online?
Then make it **WORK!**

Riga, Latvia
21st of August - 24th of August 2011



Table of Contents

1.	Bodies involved	3
1.1	Facilitators	3
1.2	Experts	3
1.3	Participants	3
1.4	Thematic Network; EU-VIP	4
2.	Abstract	5
3.	Schedule	6
4.	Virtual Internships	7
4.1	Group 1	7
4.2	Group 2	8
4.3	Group 3	9
4.4	Group 4	10
5.	Intercultural Competences	12
5.1	Introduction	12
5.2	Hofstede Dimensions	12
5.3	Intercultural Competences in Virtual Internships	13
6.	Open Space Technology	14
6.1	Introduction in the Technique	14
6.2	International vs. national internship	14
6.3	Do your studies prepare you for the business world?	15
6.4	How to motivate employees to work online?	16
6.5	How do you see the future of online work?	18
7.	Conclusion	19
8.	Credits	20

1. Bodies involved

1.1 Facilitators

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1.2 Academics

Milton Aldrete	Laurea University, Finland
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1.3 Participants

Michele Alberti	Milan, Italy
Andrei Banc	Timisoara, Romania
Daniele Carcasole	Rome, Italy
Fabien Chamussy	Paris, France
Anna Dorošenko	Riga, Latvia
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Loredana Marsilia Groza	Bucharest, Romania
Gaspar Horvath	Budapest, Hungary
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1.4 Thematic Network; EU-VIP

EU-VIP (Enterprise-University Virtual Placements) is a two year EU-funded project (October 1st, 2009 until September 30th, 2011) under the Lifelong Learning Program (ERASMUS). Its goal is to enhance the quality, efficiency and impact of international work placements by focusing on how to organize these placements.

The EU-VIP project will design models and services for:

- Virtual mobility activities to prepare students for a stay abroad and to sustain the experience after they return,
- Fully virtual placements.

These models and services will be developed through a process of testing and improving.

Project website: <http://www.euvip.eu/>



2. Abstract

A BEST Event on Education (EoE) is a public event of the Board of European Students of Technology (BEST). "Is your life online? Then make it WORK!" was held in Riga between the 21st and the 24th of August 2011.

This event was a symposium, where 21 students from entire Europe met for 4 days and expressed their opinion on the topics related to virtual work, virtual internships and intercultural competences. The aim of the event was to gather input from students, who represent one of the three stakeholders involved in the development of virtual internships: university, business world and students.

The symposium was led by the Educational Committee of BEST (EduCo) with the help of EU-VIP and the hosting Local BEST Group Riga. In order to have needed background on the topics that were discussed, before the event BEST provided topic introductions for participants to ensure they have basic knowledge about the topic.

3. Schedule

Day 1

- 10:00 Opening
- 10:30 Topics introduction
- 11.30 Coffee break
- 12:00 Watching videos
- 12:30 Discussions
- 13:00 Making posters
- 13:30 Lunch
- 14.30 Making posters
- 15:00 Exhibition walk
- 16:00 Coffee break
- 16:30 Reflection of improvements

Day 2

- 10:00 Intercultural competences
- 11:30 Coffee break
- 12:00 Intercultural competences
- 13:30 Lunch
- 14:30 OST discussions
- 16:00 Coffee break
- 16:30 Writing the final paper

4. Virtual Internships

EU-VIP organized 18 pilot projects with the goal of providing and testing out models and services for

- Virtual mobility activities to prepare and follow up students who go physically abroad
- Fully virtual placements from selection, preparation, execution to follow-up

During this session participants

- Learned more about (virtual) internships
- Discussed and analyzed the pilots
- Gave suggestions for their improvement
- Practiced new learning/discussion techniques

Participants were divided into four groups. Each group watched 2-3 videos about EU-VIP pilots. The videos were chosen based on their informativeness, relevance to degree students, length, type of internship and responsible partner (offering as much variety as possible). Afterwards the groups chose their favorite pilot and made SWOT analysis for it. Participants prepared two posters – one describing the pilot, one presenting the suggested improvements and analysis.

The technique used to analyze the pilots in more depth was exhibition walk. It permits all participants to present, discuss and analyze the work. Most students were walking around the room moving from one “station” to another where one student from the previous group presented the pilot.

After the presentation, each group discussed and analyzed the pilot and the previous findings together and made suggestions for improvement. Finally, roles were switched and another student remained at the “station” presenting the pilot while others continued to the next station.

4.1 Group 1

Fully virtual internship at Danish company JEROS

This pilot project represented the fully virtual internship at Danish company JEROS. Five international students of marketing management from Romania, Lithuania and Poland were doing their compulsory internship in the field of marketing research.

The company organized a virtual office for them. They were socially connected, working in their virtual department using a forum as a communication tool. They didn't have problems with technology.

During the internship period, three students stopped the virtual internship because they managed to find a physical internship. Two students completed their internships.

For the analysis of this pilot project, participants made SWOT table. After that they focused on improvement points.

As strong points they emphasized social connection that interns had in their virtual office and flexibility of this kind of an internship.

The biggest success factor is selection of interns. Interns should be mature, creative and able to work on their own. Other important factor is the support from higher education institution and mentors. Students must be properly coached. This is important for reputation of the institution and for students learning experience.

The main opportunity that comes with this kind of internships is the broad perspective and different points of view brought by interns from different countries. Still, there is a threat of miscommunication. Interns used written communication and the way that people from different cultures are writing is different. That should be kept in mind.

Points of improvement suggested by participants are:

- Good **selection of interns** so that we are sure they fit to the expected profile.
- Have **several interns** in case some of them drop out.
- Have interesting tasks for **motivation**.
- Define tasks with university and company. Company should be well prepared for this internship. **Tasks should be clear with the beginning and the end**, so results of the internship can be seen. Undefined tasks are important threats.
- Continuous **feedback** that will ensure that all parts get most from this internship.

Other video that this group watched:

- Virtual internship at SPACE organization
- Virtual internship at Leurea

4.2 Group 2

West Pomeranian Business School pilot project

This specific project was fully virtual placement, where polish student from West Pomeranian Business School worked for an Italian company. Since goal is the development of general guidelines, information about actual job, company or salary were not given in the presentation.

The initiative for starting this project was taken by HEI. West Pomeranian Business School found a company, advertised placement among students and selected one with the most appropriate profile. HEI decided to recognise internship as the obligatory one that students have to attend in order to finish their studies. During the preparation process Skype meetings were held as well as face to face meetings. Working methods, communication and evaluation means were set during this period.

Internship itself lasted for four weeks. After the project all stakeholders were satisfied. Student met all the deadlines and company achieved its goal.

The project was well defined and all involved parties were satisfied therefore SWOT analysis brought up mostly strengths.

As strongest points and basis of project were found:

- Initiative by HEI and recognition of internship
- Selection of student by its profile
- Efficient preparation phase with face to face meeting

Points of improvement suggested by participants are:

- During internship itself all **communication** was via e-mails. This occurred because student had full time job in Poland thus no Skype meetings were feasible.
- Internship lasted for 4 weeks, while whole project's duration with preparation and evaluation phase was 16 weeks. Students pointed out, that **preparations/duration ratio** is too high. Longer actual internship was proposed. This way ratio would decrease and more work for the company would be done.
- Weekly reports were selected as evaluation method. But there is no information what weekly report should contain. For this matter, standard report template could be prepared. It is not mentioned if the company or HEI gave **feedback** to student regarding the report. If there is no feedback, students can not know if they are doing a good job or not. Participants' idea was to nominate a mentor from the company for the intern. The mentor would provide feedback and guide the student. It would also improve integration of the student within the company.

Other video that this group watched:

- Virtual internship at KU Leuven during Erasmus

4.3 Group 3

Blended internship at KH Leuven

The pilot discussed by this group was carried out in KH Leuven and was a blended internship in which the students went abroad but were virtually supported by a peer group of students. The analysis is done based on the given information in which things like payments were not mentioned and also the roles of some people were not clear.

The main goal of the internship was to get familiar with the use of virtual means both for the students and for the company and to set up a peer group of students who communicate with the interns abroad to share experiences on how the internship is going on and how to adapt to this new environment. The students at home were classmates and were not involved in any other internship at that time apart from being in this peer group.

The means of communication were web conferences, an interactive Self-Assessment System (SIS), next to the more common means such as

telephone, e-mail and Skype.

In order to evaluate this pilot a SWOT analysis was made. After this, proposals for improvements were made by mainly looking at the weaknesses and threats. The main problem pointed out was the fact that only one student was participating in one internship abroad, this would highly influence the picture towards the student at home.

There was also a problem of motivation. The student abroad had problems keeping the contact and on the other side the company had the problem to follow up the student. Also technical problems were mentioned as internet connections, usability of software and online support. And time zones were seen as an obstacle in online communication in some cases, since it was difficult for all people involved to be online at the same time.

Points of improvement suggested by participants are:

- A **database to keep the information together** and to give a multi-sided view on the different internships that have been going on in the past and the experiences of the students.
- Keep up the **motivation of students**; for example a paid internship or the ability to get credits. Other idea was to have a thesis subject related to the internship or to involve scholarships.
- Improvement of the technology, by **adjusting the software to the needs** of all bodies involved such as student, HEI and company.
- Involve **more coordination and flexibility**, by having more conferences if needed and adjusting time zones and other practical issues.
- Add a **link between HEI and company** as this was missing in this internship; this might help the student in reaching the learning goals.

Other video that this group watched:

- Fully virtual internship at KH Lueven that also involved home students

4.4 Group 4

E-learning and media communication creating a MOODLE platform run between Padua University and hosting school in Switzerland

This group chose a pilot project, where internship was fully virtual and the aim was to set up a module platform for IT course. The student was on his second year of masters in E-Learning and media education and internship was compulsory for the course. His tasks concerned the production of a video according to teacher.

Communication among all stakeholders took place throughout whole different phases. It started with planning tasks, then four months long internship and evaluation afterwards using virtual communication tools.

Virtual internship gave possibility for the student to attend courses/teaching while working on internship activities, virtual placement was connected with his study field and student got credits, moreover internship

made part in his thesis. One more advantage was growth in understanding different working mindsets.

During internship some drawbacks appeared involved parts had some problems with establishing communication, as well it was harder to manage some emergency situation, because student was not present all the time, for the same reason for the student it was harder to gain intercultural competences and feel part of the organisation, moreover he had meetings only with his mentors not with the school. As most of communication was virtual it created situations, when student was feeling alone.

Points of improvement suggested by participants are:

- For emergency situations **use phone calls** and **have a mentor** in home university
- Make at least **one orientation trip**, that may reduce the lack of informal interaction and together with interview and detail selection process would give more credibility towards student

Other videos that this group watched:

- Laurea pilot
- Turku pilot

5. Intercultural Competences

5.1 Introduction

Intercultural competence is the ability of successful communication of people with different cultures. During the first part of the session, participants did the exercise with the task to write an e-mail to their boss. E-mail was supposed to express their unhappiness with the current job and they should ask for improvement of their work conditions. Afterwards we compared the e-mails: length, style, tones etc.

Requests in the e-mails were different depending on nationality of participants and their personal goals. Length of the e-mails varied a lot. Italian participants had the longest e-mails and Chinese participants the shortest ones.

Participants from the southern countries had more personal e-mails. Italian participants used the nicest words because of a combination of their culture and personality. In general, participants from Mediterranean countries were less direct. That is a result of the culture where people cannot be very direct in business world.

Only three participants (from France, Portugal and Hungary) asked for a face to face meeting with their boss. Participants from Italy and China mentioned their families and other colleagues. One participant (from Hungary) gave an ultimatum. Only participants from Romania used the name of their boss.

As a difference between virtual and face to face communication participants pointed out that virtual communication is usually more formal. Face to face communication is more emotional while virtual communication leaves time for thinking.

5.2 Hofstede dimensions

During the second part of the session, participants were introduced to cultural dimension according to Geert Hofstede. This research was made during 1970's and it helped to understand national differences between countries. The five dimensions taken into the analysis are the following: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation.

- **Power distance** Less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally
- **Individualism** Personal achievements and individual rights vs. individuals acting as members of a group

- **Masculinity** Masculine cultures are competitive, assertive, material, ambitious of power vs. feminine cultures appreciate value in relationships and quality of life
- **Uncertainty avoidance** Members of a society attempt to cope with anxiety by minimizing uncertainty
- **Long-term orientation** Long term oriented societies attach more importance to the future, fostering pragmatic values oriented towards rewards, including persistence, saving and capacity for adaptation

5.3 Intercultural Competences in Virtual Internships

Participants were asked what would be the most important dimension to consider when organizing virtual internships and what would be the optimal structure of virtual internships in order to maximize the cultural competence when it comes to these five dimensions.

Three out of four groups said that most important dimension is individualism. Arguments are that it is crucial for integration in the work environment and it influences motivation and efficiency of the group. For the fourth group most important dimension is uncertainty index because it shows if a person is opened for the changes.

The optimal structure of virtual internships is blended internship for students from different countries working for the same company during 6-8 months. Work should be organized in small groups, around five people in a group, with maximum two levels of hierarchy above an intern. Tasks should be specific and clearly defined. There should be more communication tools. Masculinity level should be low meaning that the competition should not be demanded.

In participants' opinion national culture should not have a big impact while performing virtual internship. Organizational culture has bigger impact. Especially in big multinational companies, national influence is very low.

6. Open Space Technology

6.1 Introduction in the technique

Open Space Technology (OST) is a way to convene people for a conference, retreat or meeting. Attendees are asked to generate the meeting agenda as well as participate by leading small group break-out sessions during the meeting time. There is usually a facilitator, but no official meeting leader who demands compliance.

While the mechanics of Open Space meeting provide a simple means to self-organize, it is the underlying principles that make it effective both for meetings and as a guidepost for individual and collective effectiveness.

The Law of Two Feet - a foot of passion and a foot of responsibility - expresses the core idea of taking responsibility for what you love. In practical terms, the law says that if you're neither contributing nor getting value where you are, use your two feet (or available form of mobility) and go somewhere where you can. It is also a reminder to stand up for your passion.

From the law, flow four principles:

- Whoever comes are the right people
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
- Whenever it starts is the right time
- When it's over, it's over

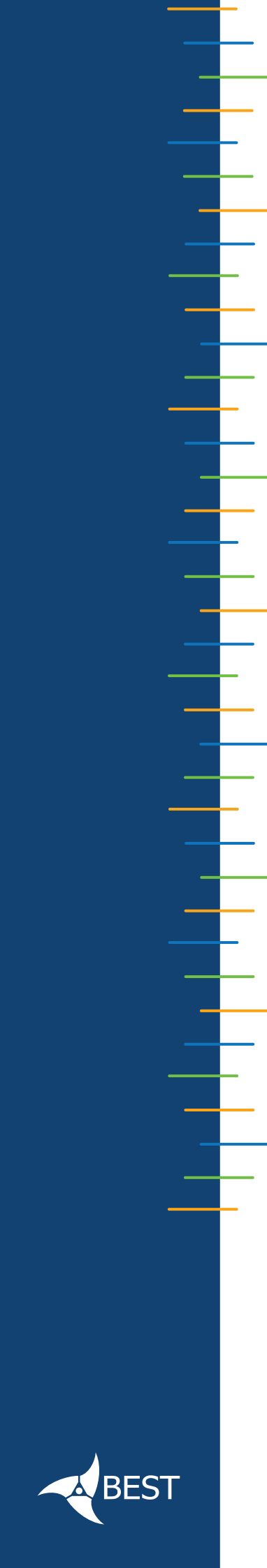
The organizing theme of an Open Space meeting is that people who care about the subject will come together. The initial meeting notice takes the form of an invitation, thus the people who have attended have chosen to be there and are willing to contribute.

During the OST following four topics were discussed

- International vs. national internship
- Do your studies prepare you for the business world?
- How to motivate employees who work online?
- How do you see the future of online work?

6.2 International vs. National internship

Question to answer was what are benefits of international and what of national internship. Discussion started with pointing out the importance of internship itself. It enables easier transit from studies to business world. Everyone agreed that internships provide experience similar to real work which companies seek for and is beneficial for students at the same time.



Internship support provided by HEI was furthermore investigated. France was considered to have the most developed internship system. Engineering student is obliged to do three internships, each on different section of field (production, development, management). Last internship lasts for 6 months and is actually recognised as bachelor thesis. University offer extensive help. Big database of national and international companies is provided to students. University also helps with different administration issues like contracts, visa applications, etc. Most of students decide to do first internship abroad and they usually find their first employment in the company, they did the last internship for.

Other countries (Latvia, Slovenia, and Hungary) have one or two obligatory internships but they don't provide any help for students. There are countries, where internship is not obligatory or recognised by University by any means (Italy, Portugal).

Often the reason why students decide for national internship is simply because they must. National internships also require less paperwork and there are high chances of getting employed by the company you did internship for. However frequently students are not paid or the salary is low. It attracts students who are not interested in international work. It is also easier to get it recognised by University.

Students who decide for international internships are ones who seek experiences abroad. Apart from national internship, international internship is usually shorter and focuses on specific tasks. Most of participants stated that they take opportunity for international internship because of better salary - many times form of summer job. In addition, such internships improve resume and give students contacts in case of future international employment.

On the downside, students usually get small or no help from their University. Agreement and all bureaucracy is on their own to handle. Option of virtual placement after international internship was also mentioned.

6.3 Do your studies prepare you for the business world?

The participants present at this topic were there mainly out of curiosity, if they actually are prepared. Most of them were in the last phase of their studies or just started a working life.

The main thought on which we started was that as a just graduated engineer you are ready to solve problems, and that you are hired because of the needs for innovation. The question to answer: are you ready for your working life?

Current preparations of students for their working life are mainly done by the Higher Education Institute and/or by the student himself. Examples are compulsory internships, which not only force you to actually try out a working environment, but as well provide valuable experience.

Websites or online platforms were also mentioned to bring students closer to the companies, and university often also provides courses on CV-writing, doing job interviews and behaviour in business environment.

Other service provided by university in Sweden is the availability of cheap office space for newly graduated entrepreneurs. Apart from this, motivation and willingness to work is an important aspect mentioned on which the student himself can contribute.

For exchange students, language differences can be a barrier in finding a job. Also it can happen that the university is lacking expertise and going abroad is inevitable for the students to gain the needed practical skills, although it is not set compulsory by the university, in a way it is compulsory for the student to prepare himself properly for a working life.

It should be mentioned that engineering in general is a very theoretical field of studies except from IT related engineering which can be practiced anywhere, and the real practise is taught like if it was a job. As the field is theoretical the earlier statement is proven that engineers are wanted for their skill to be analytical and solve problems, maybe more than their knowledge.

Some differences were discovered between the interest of the Higher Education Institute and companies; long term vs. short term thinking; the need to gain knowledge vs. need to make money. HEIs tend to leave practical skills needed by the company to provide these to the student instead of making the transition more smooth and make them available in advance.

Finally it was also mentioned that companies are not always open to newly graduates, as a very common requirement is 3 years of working experience. A solution for this can be internships.

6.4 How to motivate employees to work online?

This question popped up during the discussions about online internships. It is not easy to motivate people who work online. Also it is difficult to keep their motivation high for long periods. Participants were very interested in this topic and they have offered several ideas.

First idea was related to payment. Employees can be paid depending on the number of finished tasks, not on the number of days. Since they are working from home, they can spend more or less time on their job, and earn more or less, it depends on them. This way they have opportunity to earn more money in one day than they would in average physical job.

Employees get paid by the rules of the country where they virtually work. It can be beneficial if one lives in a country with low GDP and works in another country with high GDP. Also, one person can have more online jobs or physical and online job at the same time. Moreover, it would be

good to give some benefits to employees, like gift cards and even travelling offers because they can travel and work at the same time.

Important difference between physical and virtual job is work environment. It's good to emphasise that online employees can work from their home or any other place with internet connection. They don't spend time on travelling from their home to the office and back. They can work at any time of the day. If they finish their task earlier, they can take free time. Online employees don't have to adapt their lifestyle to the job that much as employees who work in the office; they create their daily schedule by themselves. Here we came to the question of personal life. If online employee has for example girlfriend living in another country, he can live with her and work online.

Related to working from home, it's good to provide employees with good work equipment, like fast internet connection, new laptops etc. Online work is a great opportunity for employees to develop their skills in virtual communication much more than they would otherwise. Since they have to be able to work independently, they also develop organizational skills like project management and time management. For students who study at their home country this can be a chance to do the thesis in another country without moving and without spending a lot of money.

One of the most important things that can demotivate online employees is if they miss coaching. Regular feedback can be crucial. Employees should be in constant contact with one or even more people from the company. That way they know that there is someone who is following their work and who cares about what they do. One of the good communication tools mentioned are chats where you can see who is online at the moment. If it happens that company and employee lose the contact, company should start working on improving the communication as soon as possible.

It is important for online employees to have recognition from the company for their work. Even if they are not physically present in the office, they do their job. Online working is not simple and not all employees would be capable for that.

Often it can happen that online employees lose a lot of time procrastinating and do whole work just before the deadline. The big stress that comes in those cases can be too much to handle. It can be prevented by defining milestones and smaller dead lines during the project. In order not to lose flexibility that comes as main advantage of online work, it is better if small deadlines are not obligatory. Like midterm exams where students are not obligated to pass them, but they all know if they do, it will make the work easier.

In the end, from time to time there should be live meetings and conferences.

6.5 How do you see the future of online work?

Related to changes in lifestyle, in the future there will be more and more opportunities for online work.

For some companies it is easier to implement online work. Obvious examples are IT companies. In some branches, like medicine, it can't be fully applied, but on organisational level there is a lot of space for its implementation. This also depends on sectors of one company. If a company is just starting a new sector, it is much easier to start online work, than changing to online work in the already existing sector.

Virtual work brings benefits to both company and employees. Company saves money, for example on electricity. Employees get more flexibility; they don't have to move to another city/country.

As one of the examples where online work is very efficient, participants pointed out virtual learning. One of the participants had music lessons online. It was very flexible and also he was very concentrated on these lessons.

As the conclusion of this discussion, participants agreed that the best combination would be combination of online and physical work; like 2 days working in the office. This way of working has flexibility that comes with online work while at the same time communication and bonding between employees is much stronger.

7. Conclusion

As closure of the event participants wrote short paper which summarised their thoughts about event's topics, express ideas and comments. Despite description of task some took it as regular evaluation.

Without exceptions participants evaluated event as interesting and well organised. Some expected topics to be different yet when they learned actual topics all participants found them appealing. They were surprised by the fact that EU –VIP and indirectly EU Commission collects students' input regarding education. This gave students additional motivation for active participation. Students were surprised that they have come up with several conclusions although they expressed concern that those conclusions may be useless for EU-VIP because they were very basic and general.

Working methods on event were new for most of the participants. Students appreciated innovative approach and the fact that methods were interactive. Everyone liked methods, especially parts where students were presenting their own outcomes to experts and other participants and Open Space Technology. Exhibition walk was interesting for them but its purpose unclear.

Students also expressed satisfaction by knowledge they gained. Many of them were not aware of virtual internships at all or at least of options virtual internships offer. They were intrigued. In the paper everyone recognised the importance of international internships. Due to mobility barriers virtual internships and placement will gain importance, but there is no doubt that physical international internships are better option. Similar stands for companies. Virtual placements bring many positive effect and savings nevertheless some physical placements are always needed. There are tasks which are more efficient to be solved by face to face cooperation.

The part with intercultural competences was the most surprising for most of the participants. The exercise where they had to send an e-mail to their boss proved big differences between cultures. E-mails from Italian participants were long and indirect, while Czech, Romanian and Chinese letters were very short and straightforward. They realised understanding cultural background is vitally important for good international communication.

8. Credits

BEST would like to thank Ulla Rintala and Milton Aldrete from EU-VIP project for their valuable support for the event.

Author: BEST Educational Committee
Document date: 22th of September 2011

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