

Virtual internships

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Virtual Internship Toolkit: Student 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.



MEET THE TEAM



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STUDENT SECTION

1. **Benefits and Challenges**
2. **Themes**
 - a. Planning
 - b. Communication
 - c. Advert/Promotion
 - d. Line
Manager/Mentor
 - e. Work-Life Balance



BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

There are several benefits for students participating in virtual internships. They include:

- It offers students flexibility and accessibility. Students are able to access internships from anywhere at any time through online/remote working.
- It eliminates the stress and cost that comes from travelling and commuting to work. Also, there is less time required for preparation to work.
- It facilitates accessibility for students with disabilities and breaks down the barriers for students who cannot access an in-person internship. In addition, fewer students are excluded from work opportunities.

There are some challenges associated with virtual internships, however, the toolkit provides insights on ways this can be mitigated. They include:

- Access to internet and technology needed for virtual internships could be a challenge for some students.
- Students sometimes experience difficulties in communicating with their line managers and colleagues. They felt they were “annoying”, asking lots of questions via emails or microsoft teams.
- Students sometimes find it difficult to set work boundaries and defined hours for working.
- There is a tendency for students to be less disciplined or responsible for tasks due to the nature of work been online.



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THEME 1: PLANNING

- Time management and planning are necessary for conducting virtual internships. In order to mitigate the challenges highlighted in the previous section, students require support which should be planned ahead of the internships taking place.
- Planning should include long-term and short-term strategies. The former entails providing equipment such as laptop or free versions of software for students while the latter entails one-on-one meetings and trainings for the students before the internship starts.
- It is crucial to set clear boundaries and minimise the amount of emails or work set outside of working hours. This was a trigger for some students having anxieties knowing they had work to be completed or emails to be replied.
- Virtual internships are best suited for students who can be prepared and plan well, as it is easier for them to know exactly what they need to do and how much work there is, when it is due.



“You can save a lot of time commuting and dressing, as long as you can manage your time by yourself”

“The schedule should be maintained. I mean, it should not be you keep on working after five. So it should be stopped. Discipline should be maintained about the time, so that a social life can be enjoyed. Enjoying life and working are two different parts of the experience”



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THEME 2: COMMUNICATION



- Communication is fundamental students on virtual internships. Students felt that sometimes they were left to their own accord, which had their advantages such as the freedom to work and get on with their work, but sometimes this was to an extent whereby they were lost and unsure what was the next step.
- It is important to communicate expectations and set clear deadlines for assigned tasks. Expectations cannot be vague but clear and precise about what employers want out of the student. Also, there needs to be sort of set hours for work agreed between the student and employer.
- Communication between managers and students and sharing of feedback is crucial to making virtual internships effective. The use of platforms such as teams and slack are ways to ensure effective and consistent communication with the managers in seeking assistance or support.

“I think there should be some set expectations about getting any intern in terms of hours and check-ins. This makes sure there is no miscommunication regarding what was expected before you sign up for something and realise that you cannot commit to it”



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THEME 3: ADVERT/PROMOTION

- Virtual internships can be advertised through a dedicated student platform like Careers network. This includes weekly updates, notifications, emails etc. which should be placed at the top and tagged as important.
- Other mediums that can be explored by the university include embedding internships within modules, shout-outs from lecturers, and student societies.
- The student body which is the guild can also promote virtual internships through their social media platforms. For instance, the University of Leicester has a student jobs twitter page.
- It is crucial that the “searching” side for information from students needs to be reduced. The course or tutor should have this information readily available for students.
- Internship opportunities should be prioritized for not only undergraduates but also postgraduates who tend to feel excluded.
- Internships should be advertised during periods where students are not busy with school deadlines such as exam season.

“The University of Leicester has a student jobs twitter page which could be something to look into”



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THEME 4: APPLICATION



“Two or three interviews is a lot, and the hardest one was going to an assessment centre”

“I think it can be a bit too much in my opinion, like it is experience, it shouldn't be rigorous, we just want the experience”.

“Sometimes it's exhausting looking at the stages of the process”.

- The application process need to be simplified with a CV, cover letter and interview; rather than assessment days, multiple interviews etc.
- The interviews preferred are face-to-face either in person or virtually, rather than count-down video interviews which most students found to be under pressure.
- The university should support students with applications for internships such as CV review, interview preparations etc.
- Employers could make application process easier by being specific with the job description and communicating to applicants from the start what is required before they apply. This way time is saved for both the student and employer.
- Job applications requiring work experience is excluding and defeats the objective of an internship which is to acquire work experience. It should be discouraged as it also makes it more intimidating for students to apply.
- Employers should provide students with informative and timely feedback on their applications. The waiting period of result must be given during the interview and adhered by the recruiting organisation.



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THEME 5: LINE MANAGER/MENTOR

- Virtual internships which provide a mentor or line manager are more effective. There should be a line manager responsible for all interns that demonstrate how the company works, the deadlines that need to be met, and the day-to-day operations of the company. This is extremely helpful for interns and help makes their experience better and less daunting.
- It is fundamental for interns to have a point of contact to talk through things with in the organisation. This develops a structure for their internship and increases productivity. The mediums of communication could be daily morning meetings with the use of slack, teams, etc, or through weekly meetings. Also, deadlines and day-to-day objectives are helpful. Furthermore, someone checking their work frequently is also recommended.



“You definitely need a line manager, or some sort of support system around you. You need someone to speak about any issues. They were like a guardian angel in my internship. They made the whole process a lot easier and you feel lot more welcome. It flows so much.”



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THEME 6: WORK-LIFE BALANCE



- Virtual internships should give interns a taste of work-life balance.
- It is important to separate times and make a clear schedule on when you will complete university work, internship work, and leisure time especially for students interning during term time. Strategies that could be used include setting blocks of time, creating a timetable, writing things down, and prioritising different things.
- To promote work-life balance for students, employers must be aware of university deadlines and take this into consideration. It is important that the employer plans in advance for this and works around student's needs to get the most out of them.
- Virtual internships help improve students time management skills.
- In order to ensure that students are committed, it is important for them to be compensated for hours worked.

“Some websites, notably forage, allow short internships which can be completed out of university hours which students found beneficial”

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>



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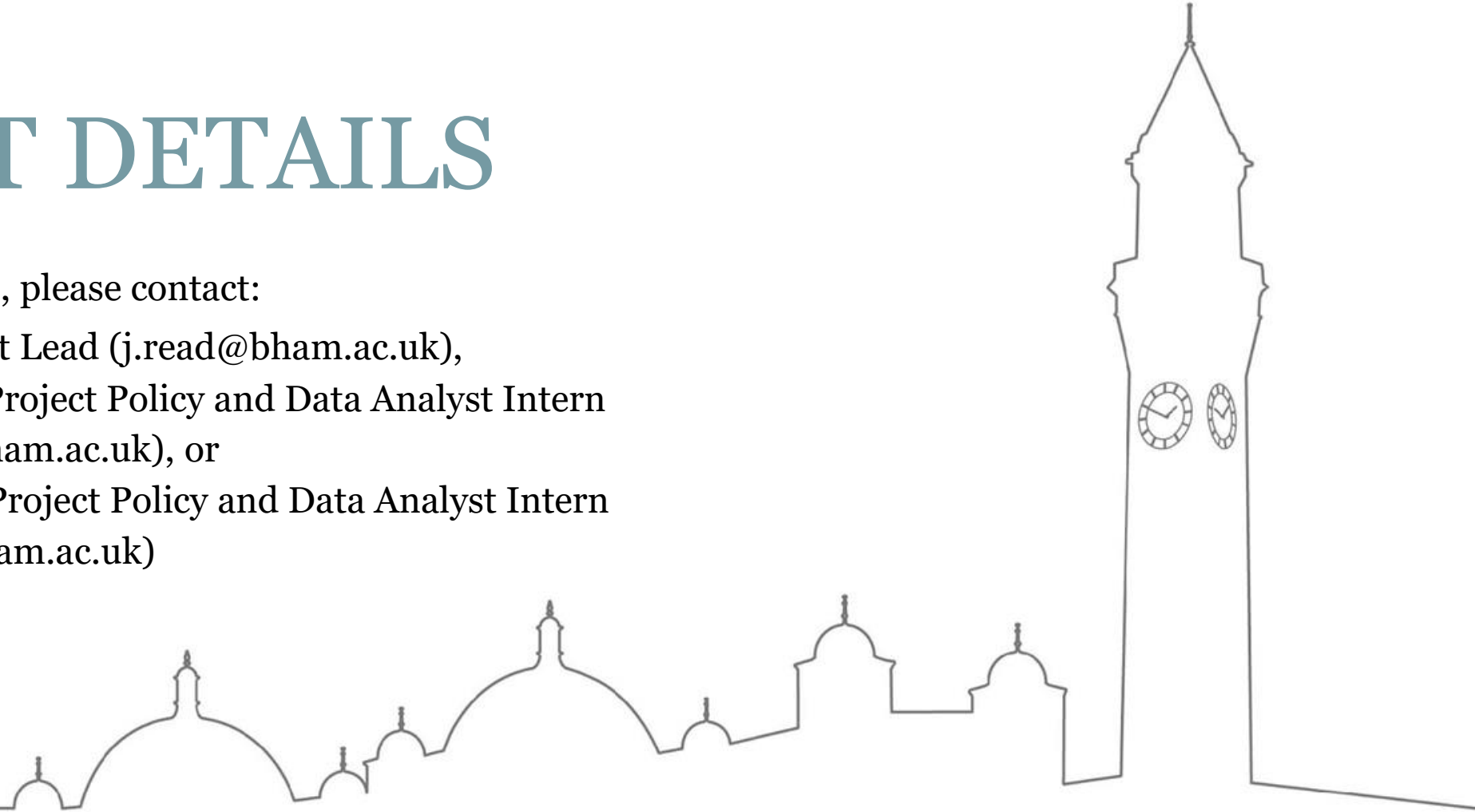


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