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## **Digital Internship Model for Higher Professional Studies**

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# **BEST PRACTICES FOR CARRYING OUT VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS**

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## Abstract

This document is representing an analysis on the available solutions and the best practices for providing virtual internships in Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and the rest of the world. This document is inseparable part of IO1 - Methodology for Digital Internship in Professional Higher Education and should be considered as part of the developed methodology.

This document presents some of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis) of the Virtual Internship platforms for the higher educational institutions in Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece and compares these solutions to the corresponding platforms in Europe and the rest of the world. Several existing solutions for Virtual Internships have been identified in the partner countries, however all of these solutions are found to suffer from specific vulnerabilities – they are either not directed or not suitable by target groups from the HEIs, they are not fully operational or they are not fully virtual and require in-person or other on-site operations in parallel to the online part.

A special focus in the document is placed on the usability of the analysed and presented platforms in the conditions of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the imposed restrictions in all partner countries.

This document is finalized with recommendations and suggestions for the effective and successful development of a model and a platform for Virtual Internships in the partner countries and the institutions involved in the project implementation.

## Introduction

Virtual internships or virtual work experience programs can replicate the work processes at companies and institutions and can connect the students to the companies themselves. The advantages of the virtual internships are undisputed – they save money, time and efforts, but they also present numerous challenges and require specific delivery approaches and far greater organizational efforts.

In a similar fashion to the online learning, the virtual internships are work experience programs where the participants, often called interns, gain experience while working in a remote professional setting and are not physically present at the job location. The virtual interns communicate with their employer or internship provider online through various means including email, video conferencing solutions, instant messaging, phone conversations, webinars, project management tools, etc.

With the advancement in the Information and Communication systems and technologies, the virtual internships have slowly started to gain grounds and to be accepted by the students in the professional higher educational institutions. Nevertheless, as this work-experience delivery method is slowly progressing, there are still limited possibilities and tools that make them possible.

The internship is a process that requires the involvement by both a trainee and an institution that offers the internship, which is often a company, but can also be an administrative or an academic establishment. In many cases the internships are offered in a triangle model between the interns, the academic institutions and the representatives of the business.

Virtual internships are undertaken by both students and graduates and are often offered in fields suitable for remote work such as information technology, media, creative arts or public relations. In the recent years, with the help of different ICT technologies, these field limitations are slowly expanding, however, there are still numerous professions, which are simply impossible or unappropriated for virtual internships.

At the present time the virtual internships are considered as a rarity, however, they are growing in popularity due to the improving technology and the growth of social media. The virtual internships, most of which are unpaid or even require enrolment fees, are often offered by small ventures and start-ups that are seeking additional help. Nevertheless, medium and large companies are slowly reaching out and are starting to explore these possibilities for labour acquisition.

Virtual internships have been publicly criticized for not providing the supervision and guidance, which their physical counterparts are meant to provide. Despite this, virtual and remote internships were a viable option amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, where travel options were limited. This showed that in specific situations, it is better to have virtual internships than none, so numerous companies are now focusing into providing them as a first stage of the recruitment process. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic showed that the virtual internships are suffering from other issues, as well – lack or limitations in the internship offerings, inappropriate or insufficient communication platforms and tools, unreadiness or unavailability of the companies to get involved in the online/remote internship process, ICT related issues, etc. Apart from all of this, the academic institutions also showed that they are not entirely ready for the virtual internships as delivery method, as they are not properly evaluated, not accepted in some institutions and even in some countries, or not accredited by the national educational authorities.

# Virtual Internship platforms in Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece

## Virtual internship platforms in Bulgaria

### 1. The Bulgarian state portal for Remote Internships

The Bulgarian Council of Ministers initiated in 2012 an initiative for provisioning of remote internships for Bulgarian students, which are studying abroad in undergraduate and graduate programs. This initiative was and is considered as big step in the development of stable solution for student internships in the area of the public administration. The largest challenge of this undertaking was the development of the online portal (Fig. 1), which is used as a tool for announcement of the opportunities for student internships in all levels of the state administration [1].

The portal is an intuitive and flexible tool that has no analogue in the countries of the European Union. It allows the entire procedure, from the application to the ranking and final selection of the students, to be conducted entirely online. This program for student internships in the state administration provides many opportunities for conducting full internships for talented Bulgarian students in the structures of the state administration at all levels and throughout the country. The internship program focuses on gaining practical experience, new professional skills and getting the students acquainted with the state administration and its processes and activities.

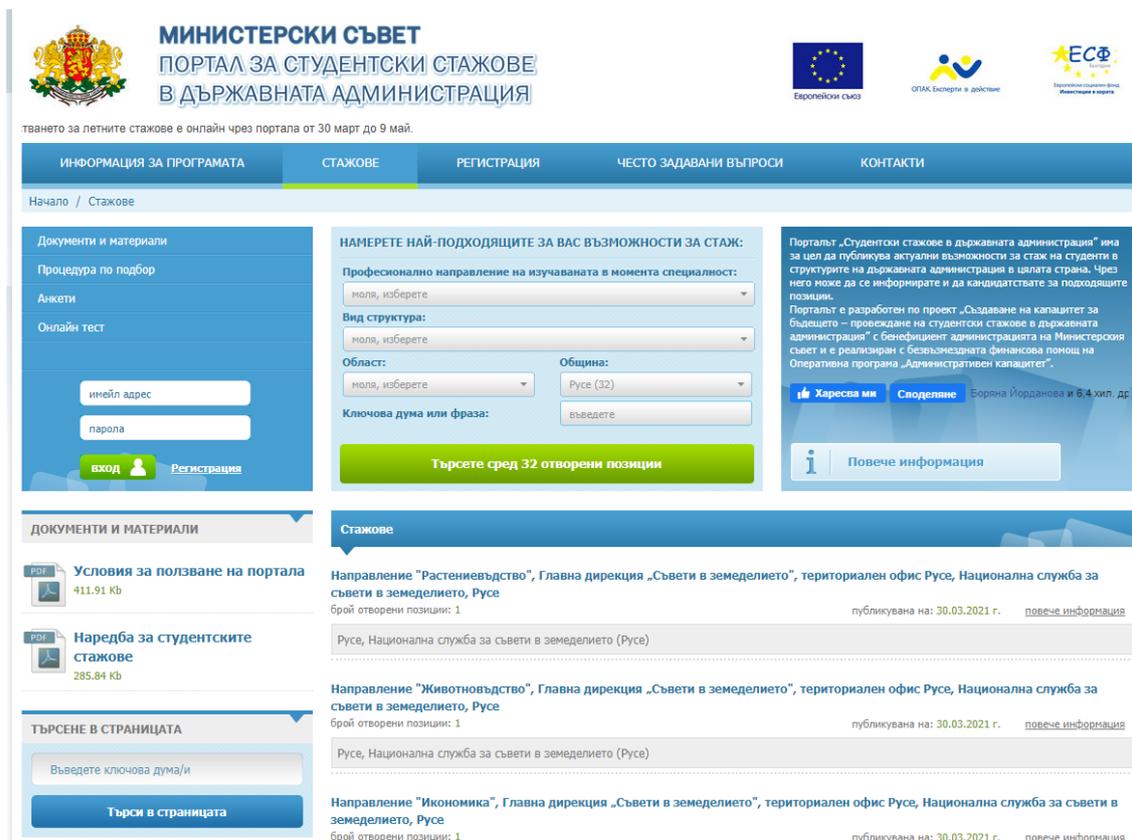


Fig. 1. The main webpage of the internship portal of the Bulgarian state

In 2014, the Program and the Portal were institutionalized through the adoption of the relevant regulations. Amendments to the Administration Act (SG No. 27 of 2014) were adopted, which regulates the conduct of student internships in the state administration. By Decree № 189

of the Council of Ministers from the 8 July 2014 (SG No. 58 of 2014), an Ordinance on student internships in the state administration was adopted. The purpose of this ordinance is to ensure the conduct of the student internship in the state administration and thus to provide practical experience, knowledge and skills to complement the theoretical training of the students. The ordinance creates unified rules and an effective mechanism for the conducting of the internships and the use of the Portal for student internships in the state administration.

Since its establishment in 2012 until now, the Program has conducted 11 centralized campaigns for summer student internships and 1 campaign for distance internships for Bulgarian students studying abroad. Throughout the year, various administrative structures also announced their internship positions on the portal. As a result, over 3,300 full student internships were successfully completed.

In 2021, the candidates can apply for at least 300 internships in 27 professional areas, which were published by 61 structures of the state administration. The application is online at [2] (Fig. 1).

The internships positions will be announced by country of study, as well as by topics and/or areas of study for which students will apply. The results of their research will be a good basis that they can use to develop a bachelor's or master's thesis, doctorate, articles and more. An advantage of the proposed solution is the fact that during the internship the student is guided and supported by a mentor. This innovative approach enables students to discover new opportunities for development and professional orientation, as well as to acquire new knowledge and skills in a certain field from the state administration.

## 2. NGB Consulting

NGB-Consulting is a company that organizes events for cultural exchange, personnel recruitment for work in Bulgaria and abroad, and consulting in the area of organizational development, management and HR.

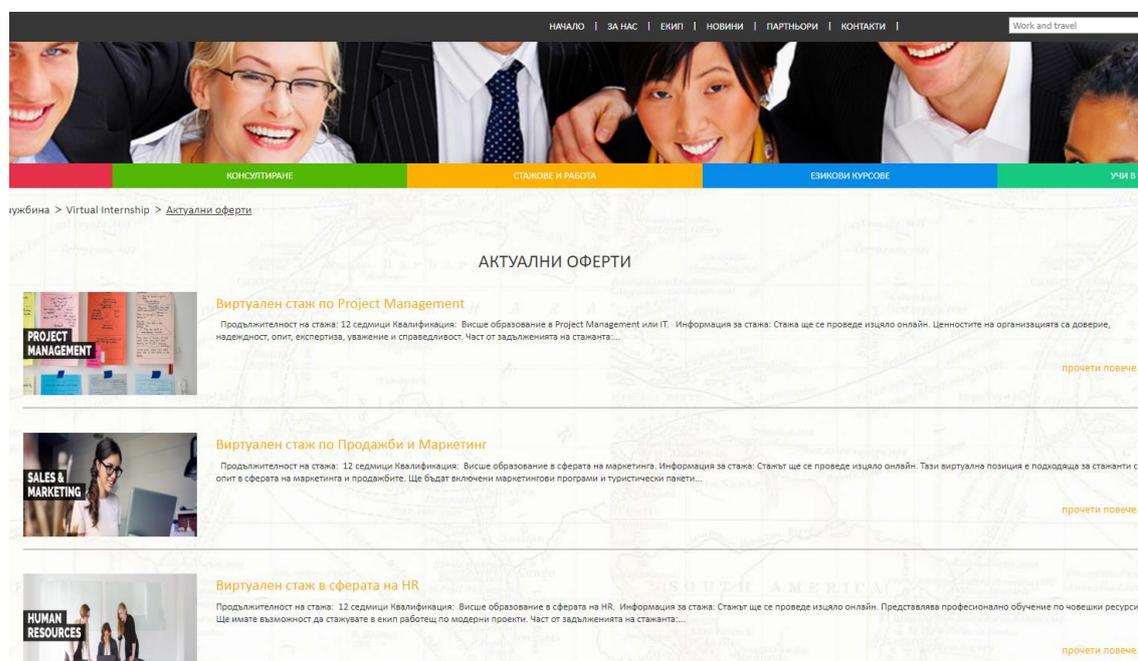


Fig. 2. The main webpage of the internship portal of NGB Consulting

The work of NGB provides continuity in the life strategies of its clients for a long period of time – starting from their studentship and participation in the US Work & Travel, Internships, etc., through the realization on the labour market and finally to the assistance NGB provide in solving

problems during their career development as workforce and managers. This idea is embedded in the company's name "New Generation's Business".

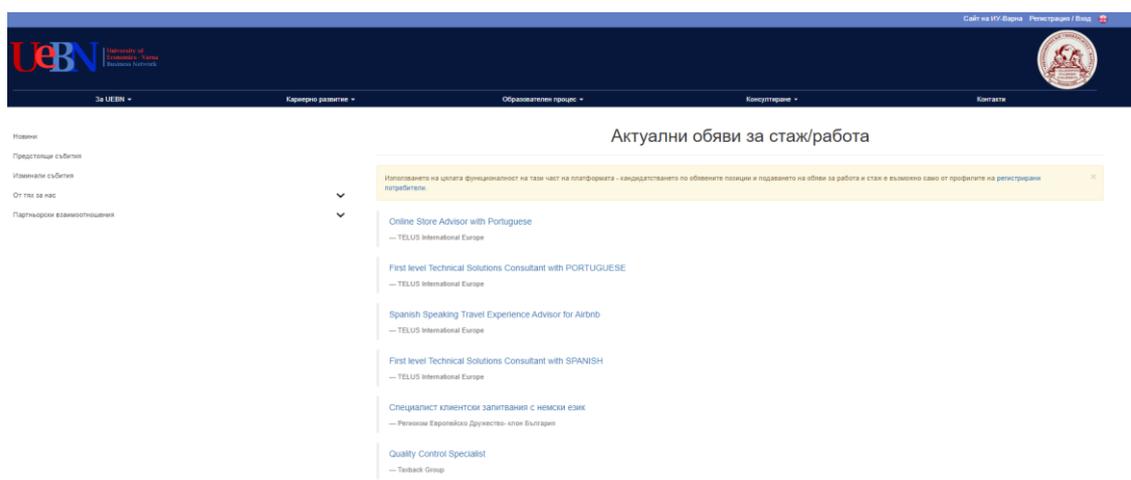
NGB is a private company, which besides internships is also offering language courses and trainings. This should be considered as a downside, as their business is not fully focused on the internships. As a matter of fact, there are only six possibilities for virtual internships on the webpage of the company – in the areas of Project Management, Sales and Marketing, HR, Software Engineering, Cybersecurity and Marketing. All of the offered virtual internships are made by Australian companies or institutions and include an application fee of 500 AUD, which is also a downside for all applicants.

The application for the internships is possible through the webpage of the company at [3].

### 3. UEBN - the business network of the University of Economics – Varna

The main goal of the UEBN network is to develop and maintain a sustainable platform for cooperation between the University of Economics in Varna (Bulgaria) and the enterprises in the region and in the country. This is a guarantee for the establishment of a productive dialogue between the academia and the business, which meets the market needs and at the same time is supporting the successful graduation and finding of jobs by the students.

The platform, which is available at [4], offers internship opportunities to students, however, these offerings are primary for in-person internships and only available and managed online, which is a huge disadvantage of the UEBN. Another issue is the geographical limitation of the offered internships, which are primary offered in the home city of the University – Varna.

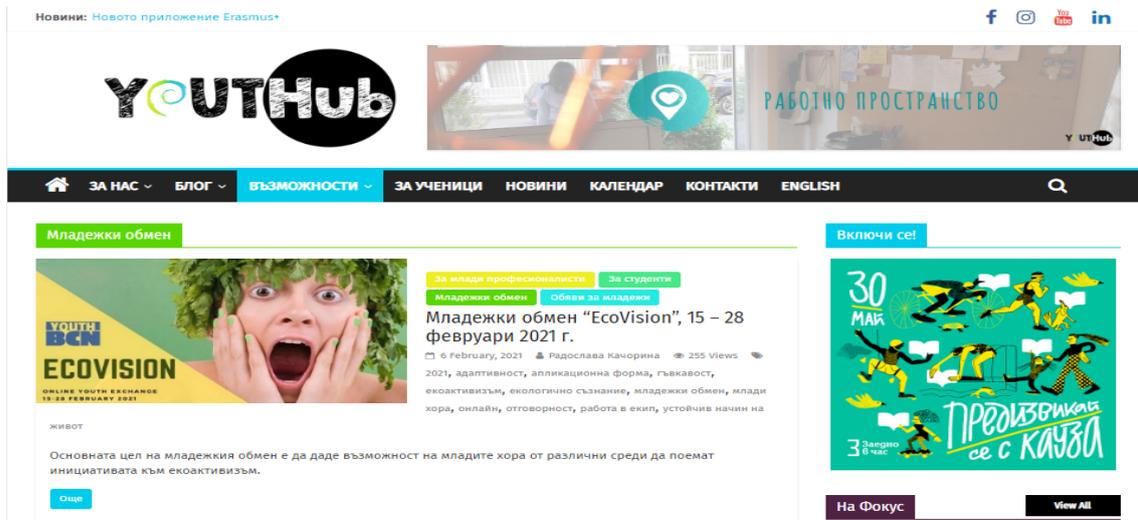


### 4. YOUTHUB – An information platform for young people

YOUTHUB is a registered non-governmental organization (NGO) that was established in 2016. Its main aim is to support the young people in their professional and personal development. One of the main tools for reaching this aim is the use of a dedicated information platform [5]. The services provided by the organization are divided into three categories – for young people, for companies and for NGOs.

The services that are provided for young people include in-person consultations for internships or voluntary activities and labour consultations. Other services for the applicants include the redirection to appropriate organizations and companies in different labour sectors, assistance in the job application processes, etc.

Apart from the services, which are offered to the interns and the job applicants, the YUOTHUB platform is also offering services to companies and NGOs. These services include internship offerings, distribution of information for the free positions, publication of information about grants and financial support possibilities, advertisement services and online banners, distribution of e-mails and posts for exchange possibilities, job and internship offerings, competitions, etc.



## Virtual internship platforms in Serbia

### 1. VIVET - online platform for the organization and management of virtual internships

The VIVET online platform [6] supports and facilitates online communication and cooperation between VET students and their mentors from companies. In this way, it is possible for the mentors to assign tasks to the students, to follow their implementation and to offer advices and guidelines. The online platform represents a framework for organization and management of virtual internships and brings together various available online communication and project management tools and guidelines.

The VIVET platform was established under an ERASMUS + project and was aimed to provide Vocational Education Training opportunities and possibilities.



### 2. Virtual Internship in Transitional Justice, Human Rights & Memory Activism offered by the School for International Training

This remote virtual internship and seminar possibility is offered for Serbia and Kosovo and provides the possibilities to explore transitional justice, human rights, and memory studies in post-conflict societies. The internship includes series of lectures that are introducing the socio-political and historical context of the Balkans in the recent decades, including the break-up of Yugoslavia, the wars of the 1990s, and post-war processes of transition as related to peacebuilding and social

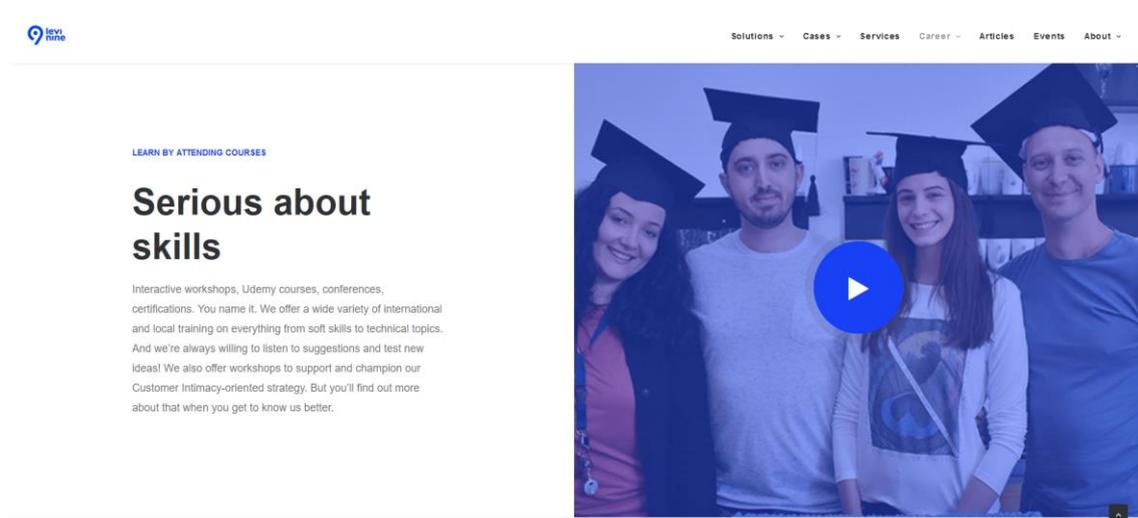
change. All applicants are introduced to the work of the local civil society actors including those engaging in memory activism, human rights, and other forms of engaged citizenship. Following this introduction, the applicant is matched to a local organization and a mentor to complete a 12-week online internship, which includes a weekly online reflection session. The application process is entirely online, through a web-platform [7], and is open for students with two application periods – Fall and Summer.



Home > Programs > Serbia > Fall 2021: Serbia & Kosovo: Virtual Internship in Transitional Justice, Human Rights & Memory Activism

### 3. Virtual Internships and job opportunities by Levi9

Levy9 is a tech company that was named after the Shoemaker-Levy 9 comet, which collided with the planet Jupiter in 1994 and changed the skies forever. Based on this fact, the persuasion of the company founders was and is to create technology that will make the world go round. That fact meant the conceptual starting point of the company and set itself the goal of bringing about lasting change through digital disruption. With its business oriented in the IT sector, the company is offering virtual internships in Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, using its own web platform [8]. All internships are focused in the software development field and for Serbia are offered for citizens of Belgrade, Zrenjanin and Novi Sad, with the option for the applicant to continue his/her carrier at the local company branch.



## Virtual internship platforms in Greece

### 1. ATLAS - the Centralized Internship Support system for Greek Higher Education Students

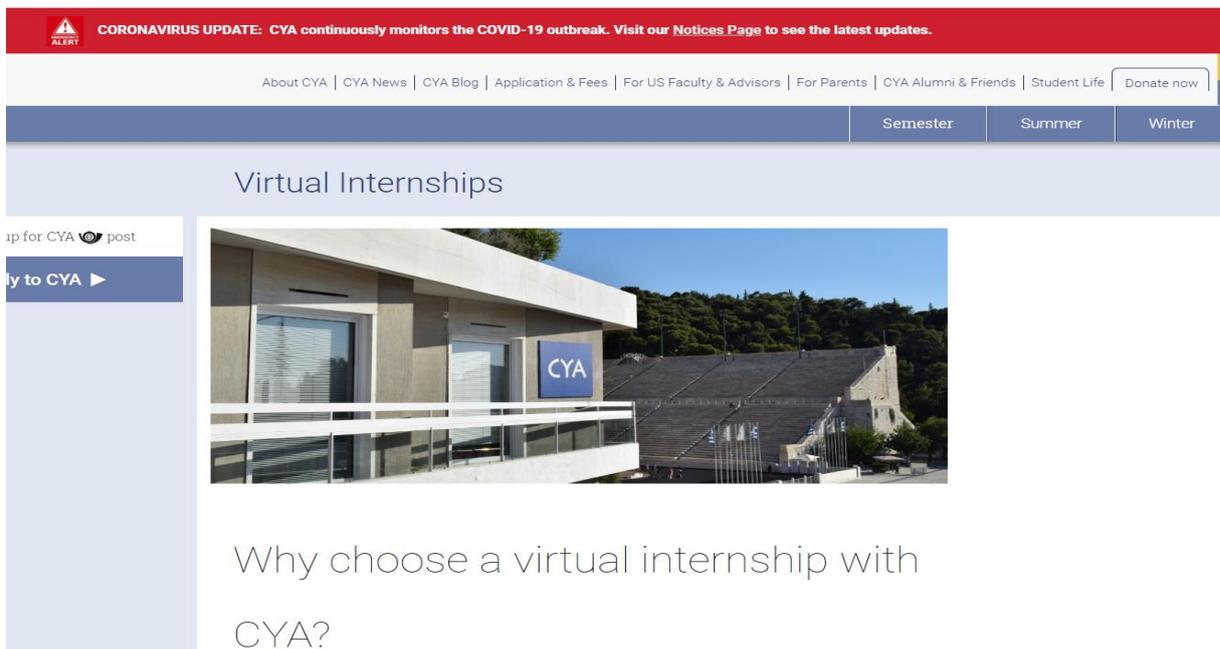
“Atlas” is a centralized online service which interconnects companies that provide internship positions with all academic institutions in Greece by creating a unique internship positions database.



The purpose of this system is to unify the application requirements and to provide services for creation of a central database of the available internship positions, to increase the number of available internship positions, to simplify the contact procedure between the stakeholders and to mitigate the bureaucracy. ATLAS is accessible through this link [9].

### 2. Virtual internships offered by CYA

CYA has been overseeing students in volunteer placements and internships in Greece for over twenty-five years. Students have interned in many of the amazing spaces this country has to offer, ranging from sectors that connect to Greece’s ancient heritage, to contemporary economic and social issues, to business, the arts, and many, many more.





CYA utilizes this experience and its strong network of contacts in Athens to offer virtual international internships designed to match the interests of the individual applicants. Greece has been undergoing dynamic changes in recent years and the students have been able to learn directly from the professionals who are behind those changes with the help of CYA. List of virtual internships and the conditions for the applications are available at [10].

## International and Global Virtual Internship platforms and programmes

### 1. Virtual internships by Eurocentres Online

Eurocentres Online, in partnership with Virtual Internships (below), offers the best possible virtual internship experience by ensuring that the students receive effective language and communication training and by providing excellent virtual internships in carefully selected companies. A downside of this case study is the fact that all courses and language training are paid, which means that prior to the internships, the applicants have to pay between few hundreds and few thousands of GBP or their equivalent in Euro.

The programme is designed for students or young professionals that wish to start an international career in an English-speaking work environment. In this way, the students develop all the professional skills they need in the field that they choose and ensure long-term career success by becoming more appealing to employers. Information is available at [11].



#### Your Benefits

**English Fluency**  
reach B2-C1 and develop  
business English skills

**Guaranteed Internship**  
20-30 hours per week for 4 to  
12 weeks

**950 Host Companies**  
based in the UK and in Asia,  
18 career fields

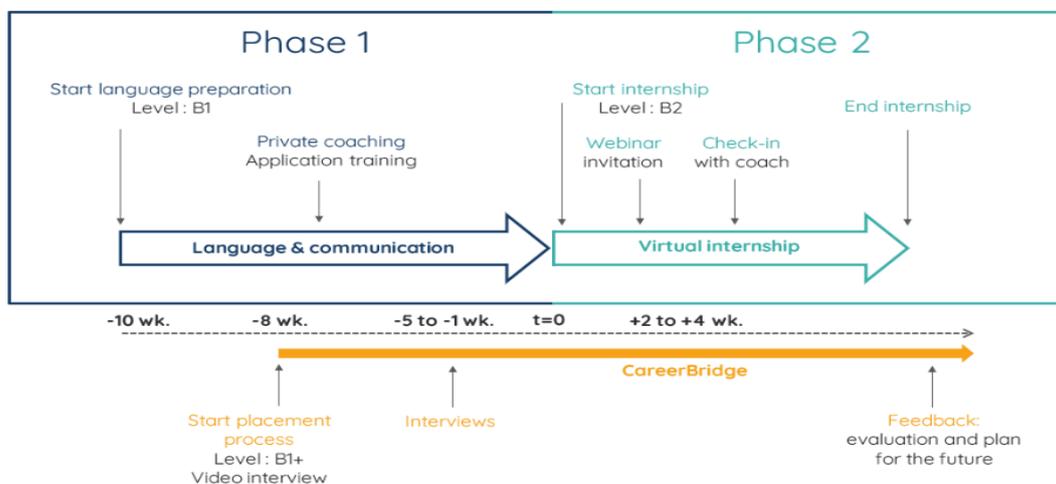
**Stand out to employers**  
show initiative by securing an  
international virtual internship

**21st Century Skills**  
receive a certification based  
on the CEFR

**360° Student Support**  
before, during, and after the  
internship

**Virtual Language Immersion**  
virtual live classes, private  
tutoring and self-learning

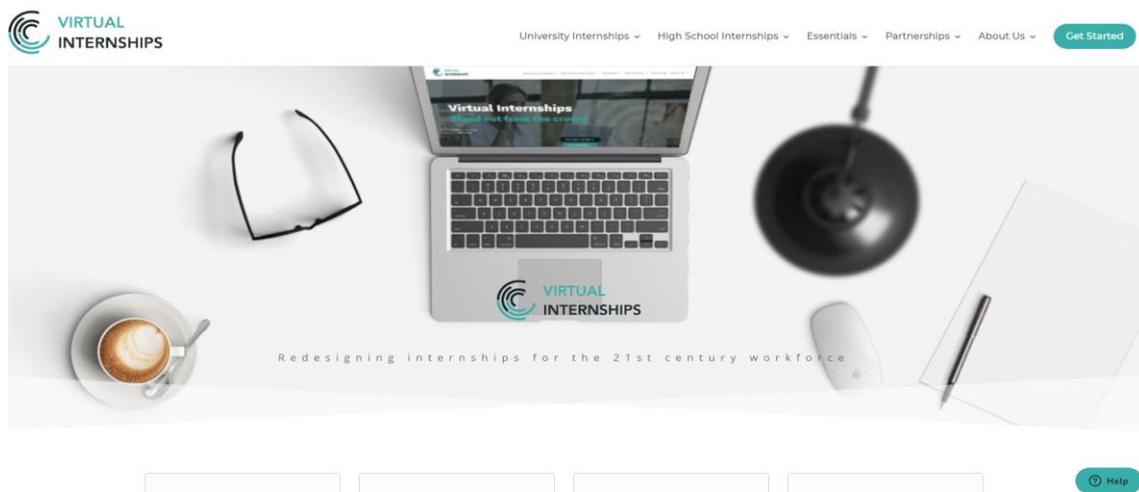
**Certifications & reference**  
Language certification and a  
reference from your company



## 2. VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS – international solution for virtual internships

The Virtual Internships programmes are focused on education, skills outcomes, and academic alignment. To that measure this private company provides opportunities for remote work, experiential learning, internships and professional development. Virtual Internships have conducted assessments and research related to internships, remote work and school to employment transition to better inform employers, universities, partners, and students about the changing world of remote internships.

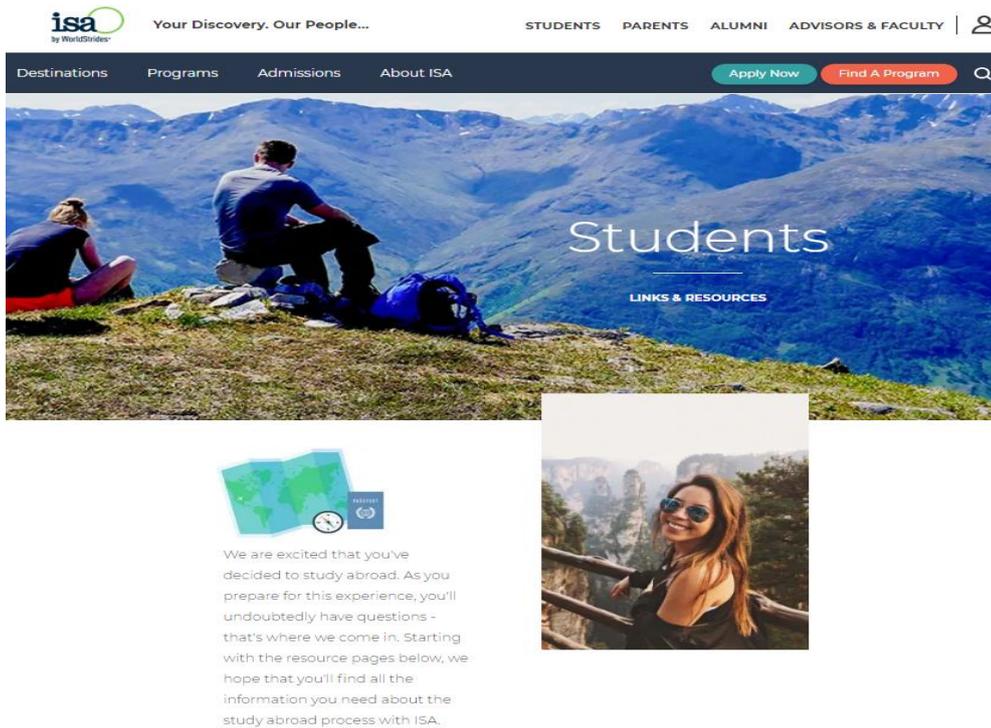
The Virtual Internships online webpage [12] offers internships for both university and high school students, however the services are not for free – an acceptance fee (approx. 750 USD) is to be paid by all interns at least 6 weeks prior to the internship.



## 3. The International Studies Abroad platform – ISA

International Studies Abroad or ISA provides the possibilities for both physical and virtual internships that are focused on high-quality, customized work experiences, while offering career-building guidance before, during and after the program. The virtual internships are for 4, 8 or 16 weeks. After submitting an online application at [13], students will be matched with a company in the field that best corresponds to their academic background and professional goals. Students will participate in either a group project, facilitated by a Professional Mentor, or an individual placement. In all cases, participants will work remotely from their own home and still gain valuable international experience with the option of earning academic credit. While some of the presented programmes are free, other can cost from 700 to 3000 USD.

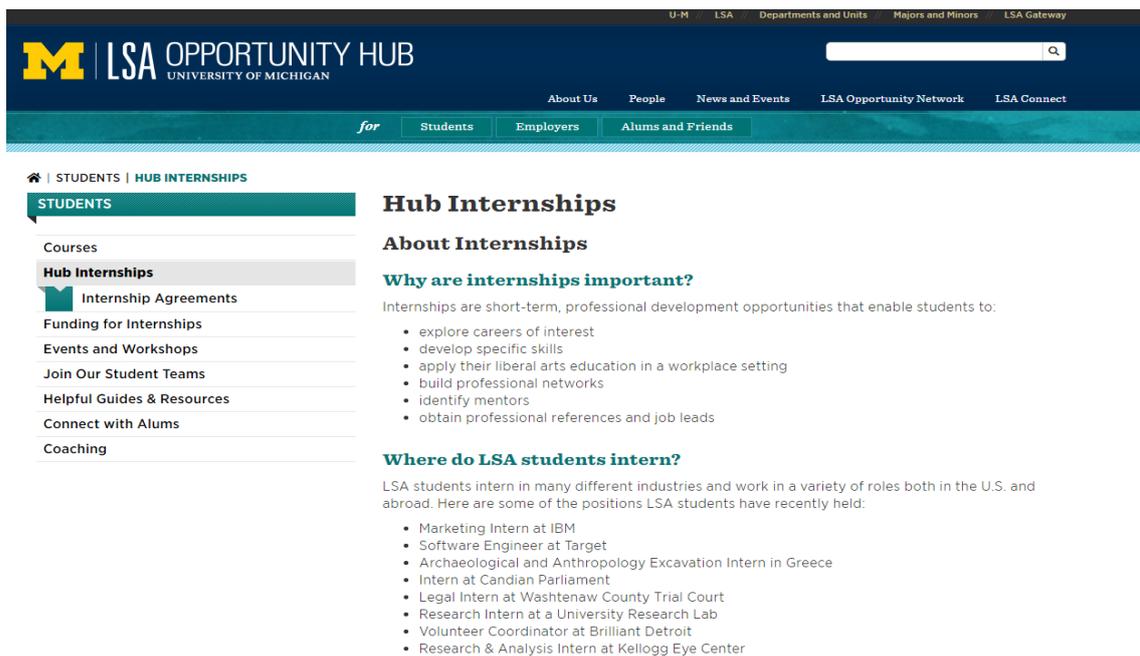




#### 4. LSA Opportunity hub

The LSA Hub Internship Program by the University of Michigan in the USA, offers a collection of high-quality, curated internships that are designed specifically for LSA students. These foundational opportunities are open to students at any stage in their undergraduate education and are paired with industry-specific programming and guided professional development to support excellence in the workplace.

Applications from LSA students of all nationalities, ethnicities, races, abilities, gender identities, sexual orientations, ages, religions, and statuses (first generation students, veterans, returning citizens, DACA recipients, caregivers, etc.) are to be submitted using [14].



## 5. Abroad HQ

The Abroad HQ are dedicated to helping career-focused students, graduates and young professionals gain meaningful international work experience. They offer over 180 affordable international internship programs across Europe, Asia, Africa, Central America and South America. For those unable to travel, they also provide remote internships that can be conducted entirely online from home.



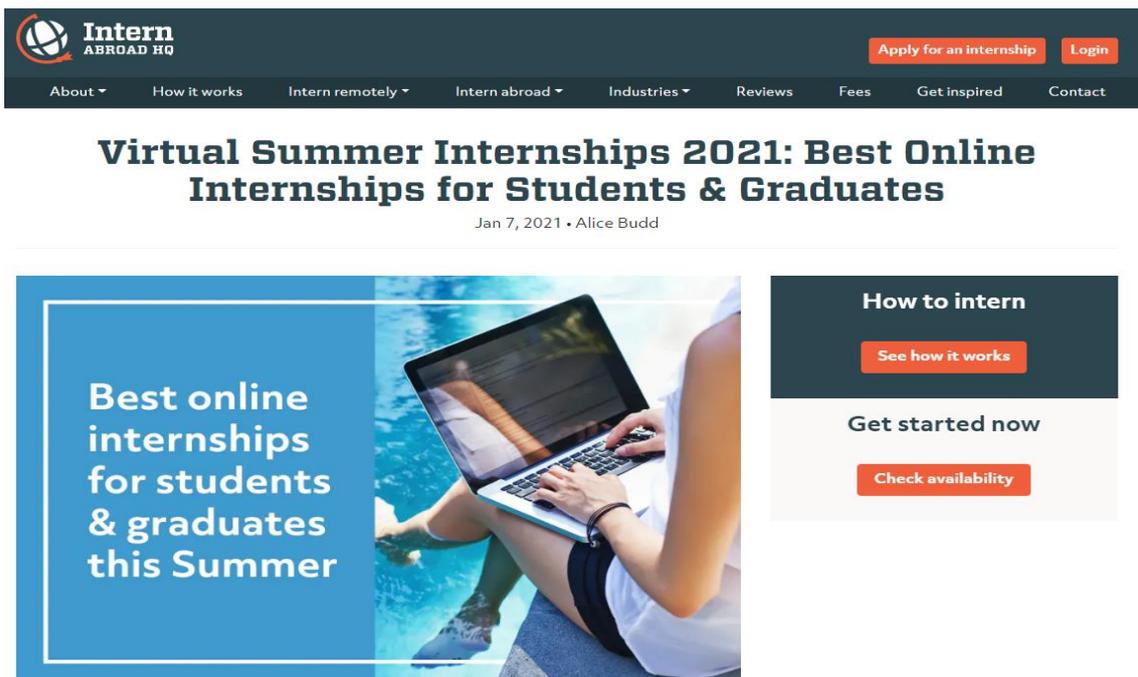
**Remote Internships - intern on your own terms**

Get career ready and enhance your resume with international work experience – without having to leave home. Our affordable remote internships are designed for students, graduates and young professionals who are unable to travel but still want to boost their career prospects with overseas work experience and professional coaching tailored to your specific career goals.

**At a glance...**

- ✓ Intern remotely with an international organization
- ✓ Flexible year-round scheduling
- ✓ Explore internships within diverse career fields

The Abroad HQ offer over 65 career-focused remote internship programs in Europe, Asia and Africa. Unlike most intern abroad programs, the applicants can complete the internship online from any location, communicating with the host organization online and through video calls. The application process is entirely online at [15], and covers the areas of Animal Sciences, Business, Arts and Media, Environmental Sciences, Health Sciences, Social Sciences and STEM. The downside of this best practice is the deposit payment of 449 USD, which is to be paid to secure the internship position.



**Virtual Summer Internships 2021: Best Online Internships for Students & Graduates**

Jan 7, 2021 • Alice Budd

**Best online internships for students & graduates this Summer**

**How to intern**

[See how it works](#)

**Get started now**

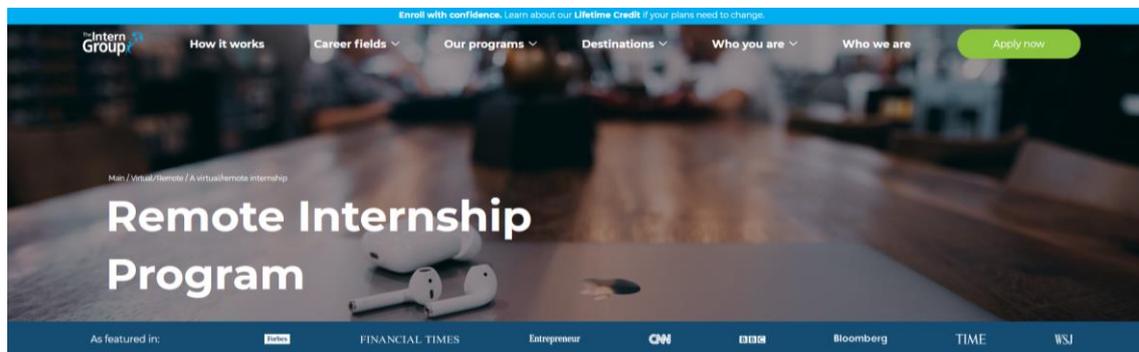
[Check availability](#)

The offered online internships are 100% customizable, providing the applicants with the freedom to start their internship at any time and choose their own working hours. All Intern Abroad HQ internships are conducted in English, or the local languages of the host organizations, which also helps develop the language skills of the applicants.

## 6. The Intern Group virtual internships

The Intern Group has partnered with more than 3000 organizations on a worldwide scale to offer opportunities for virtual, in-person and mixed internships in all sorts of areas and fields. The applicants can choose between 10, 20, 30 and 40 hours of remote internship per week for a duration of between 4 and 24 weeks. The platform is also supported by more than 100 universities from all over the world, including the USA, UK, Hong Kong, etc. All internships are offered with the corresponding amount of academic credit and offer also digital certificates, social media badges, etc.

While the application process is absolutely free, the fee for the internship programmes starts at 2000 USD and go even higher, which is a significant downside, as in many countries, this amount of money is far from possible for the average household.



### Overview

Remote internship placement

Career advancement

## Overview

Build your career from anywhere. Watch the experience in 60 seconds.

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## SWOT Analysis on the presented Virtual Internship solutions

To evaluate the presented opportunities and solutions for virtual internships, we have used the widely available and accepted approach that is based on the SWOT analysis - a strategic planning technique used to help a person or organization identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to the studied subject.

	Helpful	Harmful
Internal	<p><b>STRENGTHS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of different solutions and programs has been identified in Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece;</li> <li>• Bulgaria and Greece have national / governmental bodies that offer (limited) internships;</li> <li>• The advantage of the virtual internships is the possibility to conduct the internship without the need of traveling and investment in accommodation;</li> <li>• Virtual internships are already offered in many areas and in different topics and subjects;</li> <li>• Online application and document submission is a strong advantage of many of the internship platforms;</li> </ul>	<p><b>WEAKNESSES:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The application process requires the submission of CVs, as well as numerous other documents, which are both requested by the internship provider and the handler (academic or NGO);</li> <li>• Some study areas and subjects are not available for virtual internships or such are not offered at all;</li> <li>• Many internship programs are poorly presented and do not disclose the contents and activities for the students;</li> <li>• In the target countries, it is considered that the virtual internship programs are not equal to the physical internships;</li> </ul>
External	<p><b>OPPORTUNITIES:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The international cooperation and working possibilities are a great way to gain new practical and language skills and knowledge;</li> <li>• Specific internship areas and fields, which are not locally present, can be offered and taken from institutions abroad;</li> <li>• The flexibility of the virtual internships in terms of internship hours and duration are to be fully explored and used;</li> <li>• Virtual internships are not impacted by national pandemics, like the COVID-19;</li> </ul>	<p><b>THREATS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many of the internship providers are requesting application fee or “spot reservation” fee, which is sometimes very large for the medium income households;</li> <li>• While some of the internship providers offer sustainability, many of them are not focused on keeping the interns permanently;</li> <li>• The majority of the internships are offered by SMEs, which are looking for a cheap or free labour for specific actions;</li> <li>• The involvement of the academic institutions is omitted / unclear;</li> </ul>

## Recommendations for carrying out Virtual Internships under the DIMPS project

Based on the presented Virtual Internship programmes and solutions and following the SWOT analysis that was presented above, we can define the following best practices and recommendations, which should be applied and used in the DIMPS project:

- 1. Provide interns with real work assignments** – this simple, but important rule is mandatory and will ensure the success of the offered internships, as the interns will be engaged with actual work closely related to their study area;
- 2. Conduct regular and clear meetings between all parties** – orientation sessions for managers and mentors, as well as sessions for students will guarantee for the smoothness of the internship and for the understanding between all parties;
- 3. Toolkits** – a brief guide for the internships, the application process, the internship offer process and the evaluation process will make the applicants aware of their responsibilities and the companies well aware of the outcomes of the internships.
- 4. Internship platform** – in the modern digital society, a web platform is a must. It will reduce the administrative burden and will make the monitoring and the evaluation of the internship way easier;
- 5. Flexible work arrangements** – while the majority of the internships are to be made according to specific duration and academic approval conditions, the possibility for their flexible offering in terms of working hours per day and working days per week will guarantee more applicants and smoother internship implementation. Additionally, the virtual internships can be conducted in the cases of national emergencies and pandemics.
- 6. Academic recognition** – the involvement of the academic institutions in the internship process will guarantee that the offered internships are corresponding to the local and national rules and that the students will receive the corresponding amounts of credits;
- 7. Internship managers** - Having a dedicated manager for the intern program is the best way to ensure that it runs smoothly and stays focused on the criteria for success.
- 8. Company involvement** – the successful internship can be guaranteed by the involvement of the company personnel in the internship process – by making lectures or seminars on specific topics, by hosting social talks and discussions, by answering questions and by helping in the problem definition and solution providing processes;
- 9. Surveys** – hosting focus groups and feedback surveys with representatives of the target group is a great way to see the host organization as the students see it. Focus groups in particular can yield information about what the students find appealing;
- 10. Showcase intern work through presentations** - students work very hard at completing their work and are generally proud of their accomplishments. Setting up a virtual room for them to do presentations or demonstrations, not only allows them to show their achievements, but also showcases the internship program to everyone;

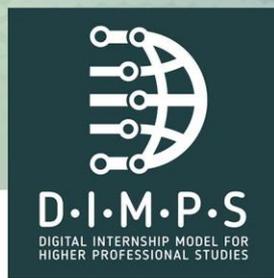
## Conclusions

Internships are important part of the study process and bring the students closer to the real-world activities and future jobs they might be working following the university graduation. With the advancement of the ICT, the internships are also slowly moving to the digital world. While the majority of the internships are nowadays conducted in-person, the recent COVID-19 pandemic clearly showed that the virtual internships in specific areas are comparable and completable to their in-person counterparts.

The establishment of virtual internships is a process that requires the approval of the companies and the interns and above all academic recognition. In this document, we have briefly analysed several of the available solutions for virtual internships and we have presented our remarks and suggestions for the proper and successful carrying-out of virtual internships.

## References and Links

1. Online portal for student internships at the Bulgarian state administration, available at: <http://staj.government.bg/informatsiya-za-programata/>
2. Link for application in the student internships platform by the Bulgarian state, available at: <http://staj.government.bg/stazhove/?prof=&strtype=&reg=&comm=176&kwd=%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B5>
3. The NGB-Consult virtual internship platform, available at: <http://www.ngbconsult.com/>
4. The <https://uebn.ue-varna.bg/bg/>
5. The YOUTHUB platform for internships, available at <http://youthub.bg/za-youthub>
6. The VIVET online internship platform, available at: <http://www.platform.vivet-project.eu>
7. The virtual internship platform offered by the SIT, available at: <https://studyabroad.sit.edu/program/fall-2021-serbia-kosovo-virtual-internship-in-transitional-justice-human-rights-memory-activism/>
8. The Levi9 jobs and internships application platform, available at: <https://www.levi9.com/jobs/>
9. The ATLAS Greek internship platform, available at: <https://atlas.grnet.gr/>
10. The CYA virtual internship application page, available at: <https://cyathens.org/318/1/Virtual-Internships/>
11. The Eurocentres Online offered virtual internships, available at: <https://www.eurocentres.com/virtual-internship>
12. The Virtual Internships webpage, available at: <https://www.virtualinternships.com/>
13. The ISA online platform for virtual internships, available at: <https://www.studiesabroad.com/en/about-isa/divisions/isa-internships/global-remote-internship>
14. The LSA Opportunity Hub, available at: <https://lsa.umich.edu/opportunityhub>
15. The Abroad HQ virtual internships, available at: <https://www.internhq.com>
16. The Intern Group virtual and remote internship page, available at: <https://www.theinterngroup.com/destination/virtual-internships/>



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# **BEST PRACTICES FOR CARRYING OUT VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS**

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