

Internship organisation in Digital Library post-graduate educational programs: students' perceptions

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***Abstract:** The importance of internships in information studies related educational programmes is confirmed by the literature, practice, and investigations of the labour market (Van Der Molen, 2007) (Loring & Kajberg, 2005) (Tammaro, 2007). The curriculum of the Master's programme DILL (Digital Library Learning) includes an internship which aims at giving students the opportunity to carry out a program of job training and work experience, that can assist them in career exploration, and makes it possible to integrate academic and professional curricula. This paper reports on a small study carried out among students of DILL6 edition, who were asked to report on their perceptions on the initial phase of the process, on the possibility of the relevant activities to foster self-reflection on knowledge, capabilities and skills, and on academic and professional goals. The focus is on the initial preparatory phase of the process, which leads to the creation of an internship plan related to specific learning outcomes, in agreement with the supervisor and the placement-hosting organisation. The aims of the study are to investigate students' perceptions about the usefulness of the internship's initial phase, and highlight perspectives for improvement. The objectives include identifying advantages and barriers, and investigating the time dedicated to self-reflection if related to other practical and technical aspects. The qualitative methodology of this exploratory work includes different ways of compensating for the small number of students involved: a questionnaire to students, an interview with the local coordinator, a panel with experts during a workshop, questionnaires to the placement coaches.*

Keywords: perception of internship, Digital Library Learning, video resumes, placement

Introduction and purpose

The importance of internships in information studies related educational programmes is confirmed by the literature, practice, and investigations of the labour market (Van Der Molen, 2007) (Loring & Kajberg, 2005) (Tammaro, 2007). The curriculum of the post-graduate educational Master's programme DILL (Digital Library Learning) includes an internship of four weeks (125 hours) at the end of the third semester, which aims to give students the opportunity to carry out a job-training program with digital library work experience, and assist them in career exploration and specialisation. This allows integrating academic and professional curricula. For the purpose of this study, internship is defined as an opportunity to integrate career related experience into (post-graduate) information science education by participating in planned, supervised work. The work should be related to what is taught during the course and be at an appropriate level of professionalism. Students' learning outcomes are stated at the outset of the internship and evaluated at the end (Tammaro, 2013). The process involves different stakeholders, students, education institutions, receiving organizations, and takes place along three different phases: before, during and after (Vriens & Van Petegem, 2011); the focus here is on the initial preparatory phase, which leads to the choice of the internship location, and to the creation of the internship plan. This paper reports on a small study that was carried out among Master's students of DILL6 intake, who were asked to report on their perceptions about activities fostering self-reflection on knowledge, capabilities, skills, academic and professional goals. The aims of the study are to investigate the perceptions of students regarding the usefulness of the initial phase for a conscious choice of internship and for the setting up of learning outcomes related to their personal interests, and also to highlight perspectives and paths for improvements and development. To achieve this, the objectives include identifying both advantages and barriers to self-reflection fostering, investigating the time dedicated to self-reflection if related to other more practical and technical aspects, understanding whether video resumés can inform decision making and

assist employers in choosing candidates and proposing an internship plan that comprised a suitable list of proposed activities.

DILL Internship preparatory phase

The preparatory phase starts with a Summer School and proceeds through a to third semester of studies in Italy. The choice of the placement host by students is possible after establishing the internship's learning goals and agreeing upon them with their mentors; to this purpose, students are asked to submit a plan, including the necessary activities to be able to achieve the outcomes. Learning outcomes are constantly self-assessed during the process and later evaluated at the end of the experience. The responsibilities of the organising staff in Parma include striving to obtain high quality internship opportunities, supporting students in their application and choice, supporting the phase in which both content and level of assignments are arranged, ensuring adequate supervision and constantly assessing the process. The phase includes preparatory experiences and activities for self-reflection on learning needs, as a starting point for an educational and professional portfolio (Grant, 2005).

Organisation of placement preparatory meetings with the internship supervisor; two face-to-face meetings are organized starting from the Study School, to collect the main ideas, give advice and make students focus on self-reflection about their knowledge and skills.

Preparation by the candidates of a personal development plan; students had to prepare a plan, based initially on answers given in a survey (Internship Interest Form), brainstorm preliminary learning objectives, consider relationships to educational and career goals, reflect on the knowledge or skills to develop.

Creation of video resums by students to be integrated into their curriculum vitae. Candidates have to be accepted by the placement host; the process is competitive, students have to prepare a Curriculum Vitae and a Video résumé. A panel of information science experts underlined the fact that differentiating is a challenge to be faced in the critical employment panorama of information professionals, which is common to many countries, and the information overload era; the critical skills for an information professional looking for a job are flexibility and a capacity to project competences and self-reflect on learning needs. A possible application of digital video production inside education is a video résumé; by video résumé is meant a short video introduction created by candidates, to describe their individual educational background, work experience, competences, skills and motivations, and to assist them in marketing themselves for prospective internships as part of an educational experience. In comparison to traditional curricula, there are similarities and differences; the video must be short so that the information is condensed in a short speech, and diverse kinds of skills are involved. The idea of video resums comes from the United States and reached Europe in 2007. The Vault society carried out a survey, the results of which showed that 89% of job offering companies would be interested in watching a (short) video introduction, while they did not receive many (Yaptangco, 2007). There seems to be limited research on the production of video resums within a curriculum with reference to applying for internships and reflecting on the students' knowledge, capabilities and skill; nevertheless, studies concerning electronic portfolios as opportunities for self-reflection on learning and ways to show competences started recently (Cheng & Chau, 2009). This paper does not intend to discuss it in detail, but considers the video résumé as a step towards the creation of educational and professional e-portfolios.

Writing of the internship plan; after being accepted as interns, students have to write the Internship Plan, which consists of a list of likely tasks to be completed, together with a statement of the student's role and responsibility during the internship. Interviews are suggested with the placement coach, to discuss competences and activities. This is the basis for developing the work schedule agreed on by both Internship Mentor and Supervisor.

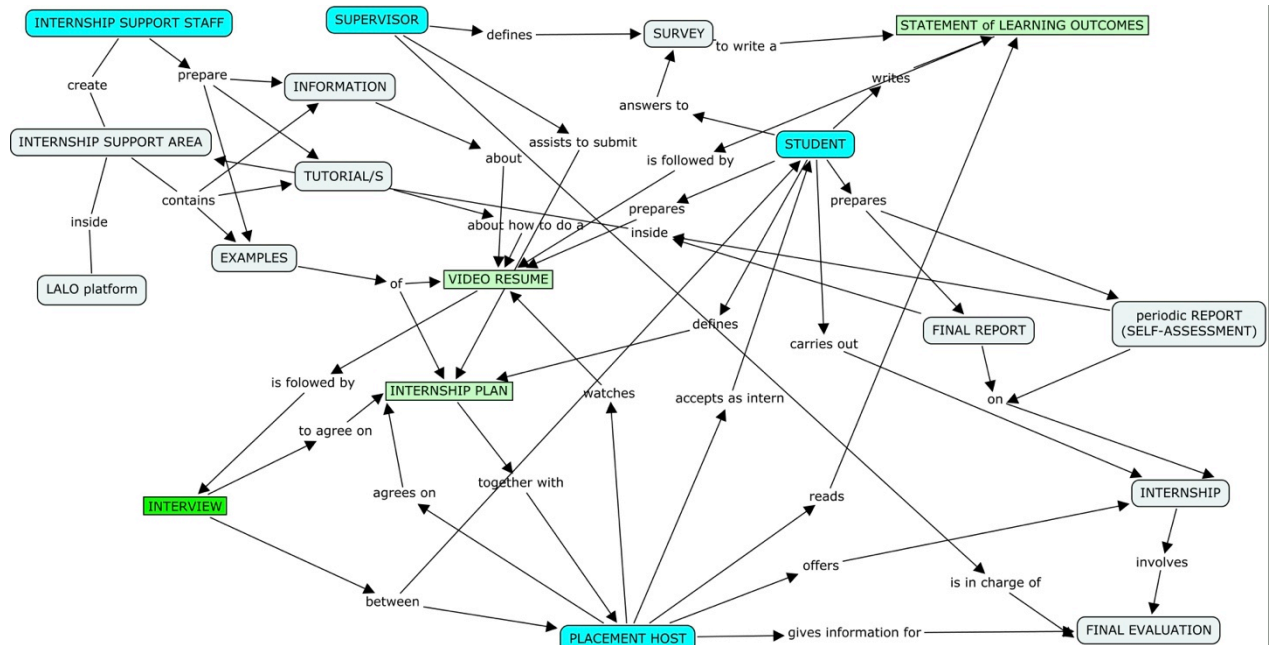


Fig. 1 - DILL Internship Workflow: actors and process main steps

An online area is available where students find information, examples of an internship plan, and upload their weekly reports. Starting from Dill5 intake, an "Internship Companies Database" was run, where students find the placements made available by agreements in the framework of the Master's degree.

In comparison to previous years, some differences in the organization applied during the last intake:

- 1) Meetings were organized using an online tool; this made it quicker than previous years, when appointments were fixed upon arrival and were managed manually.
- 2) User accounts to access online services at the University of Parma were made available four months before the beginning of the summer school; during previous intakes the students received them once they were in Italy. This made it possible for students to access the internship area months in advance.
- 3) A "video résumé" was added as a necessary step when applying for the internship. This was announced beforehand, so that students would be able to concentrate on the possible opportunities and start reflecting on their interests and their abilities. Examples were made available in the online area, together with information and hints on the steps to be followed to prepare the video introduction.
- 4) An internship workshop was organized during the third semester (Walton, 2013), and held using the Nominal Group Technique for focus groups. Students were asked to reflect on their internship, and share their views with the group. They were asked to think of as many answers as possible to the question "What do you want to gain from your internship?". The meaning of each sentence needed further clarification, and duplicates were removed. Students were asked to rank their top three answers in order, and the process led to the identification of the top four.

The following four main goals of students concerning their internships were agreed:

- Application and testing of knowledge
- Social networking
- Involvement in the organization
- Increase of employability

The goals were further discussed in groups, whose views were shared with the class, through drawings, maps and posters.

Methodology

The qualitative methodology of this small exploratory work includes different methods of compensating for the small number of students involved: a questionnaire was supplied to the participants of the course. Notes taken during a panel with experts on the occasion of the workshop in i-schools that was organized during the 17th conference on Theory and Practice of Digital Libraries and an interview to the local coordinator, are used to inform the study. Short questionnaires were included in the methodology to understand the perceptions of the receiving organizations' mentors involved in the candidate choice. Questionnaires were chosen rather than interviews, due to the position of the author, who is both a student and a tutor for the Italian semester. Time being a further issue, it was decided not to engage in face-to-face or online interviews. In spite of the small number of individuals involved, the survey was anonymous; records kept of the survey responses did not contain any identifying information about respondents, who were informed that their feedback would be used for some research into identifying potentialities, challenges and suggestions to improve the process. Eleven answers were recorded; out of a group of eleven students, but two were incomplete and not considered. Four out of seven mentors answered the questionnaire (six answers were recorded but the incomplete ones were not included in the analysis).

Discussion of the results

While considering examples of video résumé, information/hints and the internship database generally useful, students asked for more detailed information about internship opportunities, organizations and possible activities. Students suggested removing from the database those institutions that do not have time to answer requests, or whose procedures seem to make it difficult to organise the internship, given the short time. A desire emerged to have video presentations, live interviews, and lectures from all the organisations available for internship hosting, with a view to making it easier to decide which organisation to apply to.

Having the information in advance was not considered useful in one case. It would be interesting to understand whether the reason is correlated to further organizational difficulties which made it quite unnecessary later, or whether it is just considered not useful per se to have the information available beforehand; that was not possible by means of an anonymous questionnaire.

Students requested they be given the opportunity to choose a different organization as a place of internship, from those available. This is understandable from the students' point of view, but the time available to organize an internship is short. Agreements are necessary, they require time and effort; adding a new internship opportunity to the others, when the third semester has already started, might make the process too complicated, considering the resources devoted to it.

With few exceptions, students perceived that the workshop made it possible to discuss with others and discover objectives they had not thought of, and to think of ideas to make the internship experience successful. In most cases it made students change their ideas on

internship objectives, to some extent. Some comments were enthusiastic. A proposal was put forward to facilitate a short workshop with the specific task of familiarizing the student with internship objectives.

The students were asked to rate the importance of skills required to complete the preparatory phase of the internship and the creation of an effective video résumé, helpful in being accepted as a practitioner, and reusable for further job applications. In most cases some skills were important for all but one student (e.g. thinking, information, interpersonal social skills in both cases). All students considered communication and technical skills important for the creation of the video résumé. Results might be related to the students' backgrounds, and reflect approaches by students in the two different cases, with emphasis on the technical skills in the video résumé production, on thinking, social and communication skills in the preparatory phase of the internship as a whole. Other skills were proposed as important in the process: problem solving, decision making, analytic, creative, time management skills.

Placement preparatory meetings with internship supervisor

The students agreed on the first meetings being quite useful in most cases; various answers concern the midterm meeting.

Personal development plan

Different levels of agreements apply as far as the Internship Interest Form is concerned

- helping to imagine and describe the kind of desired internship;
- making it easy to define knowledge, skills, outcomes expected to be achieved;
- making it easy to state how to use the experience to extend and deepen knowledge and skills.

Students reported they were already more or less clear in their minds how the internship could advance their goals; this might have influenced them in their judgment, and depend on the specificity of each situation.

When asked about perceived usefulness of the personal development plan to foster ideas of activities for the internship, students had diverse opinions; in most cases it was perceived as useful per se but too general in practice. Most mentors considered the preliminary personal development plan a useful basis for the following agreement on learning outcomes and activities, and too general in one case.

Suggestions came from open questions. Needs emerged for further ideas prior to the plan phase, for a definition of the terms used, and requirements concerning the presentation of the form. A student proposed organizing regular workshops to discuss the development plan in groups and gain knowledge of possible implications and issues. A proposal was made to postpone it in order to gain more information about the possible internship before developing the plan; such a proposal suggests explaining clearly to the students that the personal development plan gives assistance in the choice by reflecting, it is personal, and does not strictly depend on the specific internship place choice.

The mentors suggested the students should consider the internship more as a preparatory phase for the Master's Thesis and to state expectations and ideas for the thesis from the beginning. In spite of considering the plan useful, flexibility is required to allow for better interaction and applicability. A need emerged to gain fuller information on candidates'

competence and interest, and on their being LIS- or IT-oriented not only by the supervisor, but also as a declaration in their personal development or internship plan.

Digital video resume

DILL internship mentors confirmed receiving a video résumé from intern candidates to be uncommon. Students had diverse competences and experiences in video production; all of them considered it useful for future employability but stated they had never been asked to produce a video résumé during previous educational experiences. On the whole, the production was considered complex but rewarding in terms of testing technical skills, in some cases in terms of discovering personal knowledge, skills and competences and summarizing them. In one case it was considered a waste of time. Time was an issue, anxiety made it sometimes necessary to practice a lot before getting a good copy; a need emerged for having suggestions and guidance on the software to be used for the production, and it was proposed to help students in producing the video at the university rather than alone. The level of expertise with software and hardware, time needed for storyboard and production, and necessary communication abilities were considered by the majority the main challenges concerning the production of the video résumé in the context of the preparatory phase of the internship. There was general agreement on the importance of the video to improve self reflection on knowledge, capabilities and skills, and self-test of the ability to sell one's capacity to the employer; there was no complete agreement on it being important in terms of testing a skill that could be useful for the future and pre-reflection on possible activities to be included in the internship plan. An anticipation of the presentation of the opportunities of the internship prior to the video production was suggested. Since pre-reflection is important in the internship preparatory phase, this might suggest the need for students to perceive better the importance of individual reflection irrespective of the choice of the internship site.

Key-words mainly associated with the video résumé were “interesting” and “challenging”, but also “time demanding”, “useful”, “necessary”, “self-evaluation”, “preparation for internship”, “learning experience”, “competition”.

Mentors considered receiving a video résumé interesting, but respondents seemed to agree on it being a compendium rather than an alternative to the “traditional” CV, and that receiving both is a procedure for better candidate selection.

Internship plan

The process would require likely tasks to be listed by students and agreed upon with mentors, but this phase seems to have been faced in diverse ways. Some students (the majority) wrote the plan and agreed upon it with the mentor later, others received the list of activities from the mentor; in one case the available draft was not used to write the plan. Such diversity in the approach is also reflected in the mentors' answers.

Limitations

The study is limited to the small number of enrolled students; a further limitation concerns anonymity in the data collection, given the small group, and the risk that identity might be revealed in the open questions, since the situations were sometimes specific. Nevertheless, the students were informed, before answering the questions, that their answers would remain anonymous. Questionnaires were chosen for the reasons explained, but in some specific cases an interview might have made some answers clearer and allowed for a better understanding. One mentor did not receive any video résumé; as there were few hosting organizations; such

an occurrence might have made a difference in the overview of the mentors' perception on such a practice.

Conclusions, perspectives and paths for improvement and development

The research gives insight into the perceptions of respondents, and is of an exploratory nature. No absolute conclusions can be drawn from the results, only an indication of potentialities, positive aspects and challenges, and suggestions for future improvements.

Students and mentors reported diversely, depending on contexts and situations. The proactive or non-active approach and involvement by single students presumably made a difference, as probably did the different institutional requirements concerning administrative aspects. It might be useful to make it clearer to students, what the involvement required is and their role in the process.

Since the internship organisations were located in different places with specific infrastructures and habits, it might be useful to verify in advance the requests of the hosting organisations as regards timing and official documents to be prepared, as they might have changed in time, in spite of the agreements already in place. Collected data suggest making information available in the database in a more detailed, coherent and similar way by all organizations willing to host students.

Some of above-mentioned aspects are mainly to do with organisation, while the focus here is on self-reflection on learning outcomes related to personal interests and previous experiences and background; nevertheless, it seems that administrative and organizational issues might have influenced some users' perceptions on the whole preparatory process, and made a difference in the time dedicated to self-reflection if related to other more practical aspects. Meeting with the supervisor might be perceived even more useful if they could focus more on learning and less on organisational aspects. The student development plan might be revised according to the suggestions, and made more detailed. A glossary might be added to clarify terminology.

The workshop was appreciated; this suggests organising it regularly and considering some suggestions to improve and add further practical activities comprising problem solving, decision-making, analytic skills.

Video résumés are likely to be used again in the future, as students and mentors considered them useful, as integration to the CV; some further facilitation might be added for students.

One mentor stressed the perception of an improvement of the process related to previous experiences; this supports the idea that an investigation might be useful each year, for constant evaluation and improvement. Interviews would be probably more suitable to gain a better understanding of some of the answers and aspects covered, but this might be decided depending on the involvement of those carrying out the research in the process, since a direct involvement with people who give support and assistance during the following steps might influence direct answers in an interview.

It seems a general opinion of the actors involved that it would be worth anticipating the organisation phase of the internship; it might be useful for all the stakeholders to have more time for the activities, and also to avoid administrative and organizational issues that influence perception on the internship process, and concentrate more fully on learning matters and reflection.

A report on the internship period is foreseen among the assessments during the semester; a further extension and a future scenario could include the integration of the video résumé inside an e-portfolio, to improve the reflection on learning needs, knowledge, competence and skills before and during the internship and as a complement to the report. Such integration should be carefully considered, as it would require time and resources to organize seminars for students to introduce e-portfolios, and to have the process constantly facilitated, as suggested by some scholars (Cheng & Chau, 2009).

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