

DIM-4-HE conference in Italy, a successful initiative on the topic of hybrid and digital internships!

The public event "***Innovation in virtual learning - the universal model for digital and hybrid internships***" hosted at the University of TUSCIA in Viterbo, was the opportunity to present the model created by the European project "DIM-4-HE - Development of Digital Internship Model and its support system for Higher Education" (ERASMUS+) and **until 15 December 2023**, it will be possible to contribute to the validation of the model (available in EN, LV, PT, LT, IT at: <https://dim4he.mii.lv/>) by sending comments and inputs via the questionnaire available at the following links, based on preferred language:

English version: <https://forms.gle/YtqbQV6nUjnUTfLy8>

Latvian version: <https://forms.gle/QpUZgie3QCCoFhAz6>

Italian version: <https://forms.gle/kFjQ2rE111seKjE78>

Lithuanian version: <https://forms.gle/xGMiVEMWMrnTgfv89>

Over 500 participants, of which 438 online and 80 in person, participated in the hybrid conference where the results of the DIM4HE project and the related universal model were presented to ensure and strengthen the quality of the experience of curricular and extracurricular internships, with particular attention to hybrid and digital ones.

The event, organized locally by the **Special Agency of the Chamber of Commerce Rieti - Viterbo** "Centro Italia" was hosted at the University of TUSCIA, on November 10th, 2023 in collaboration with the partners of the European project "***DIM-4-HE - Development of Digital Internship Model and its support system for Higher Education***" (co-funded by the European Union under the ERASMUS+ program), namely the **College of Business Administration** – BVK (lead partner), the **Technical University of Riga** (Latvia), the **University of Lusófona** (Portugal) and **Šiaulių valstybinė kolegija / Higher Education Institution** (Lithuania).

The debate, moderated by Mrs **Inete Ielite**, coordinator of the research platform on information and communication technologies at the Technical University of Riga (Latvia), saw the participation of public and private institutions, with welcome greetings from the Municipality of Viterbo and the Chamber of Commerce of Rieti – Viterbo.

In the initial part, the institutional greetings of the institutions and the host territory alternated. First of all, the Deputy Rector of the University of Tuscia, Prof. **Alvaro Marucci**, also welcomed and greeted the Rector, Prof. **Stefano Ubertini**, wishing them good luck and reminded them that the University of TUSCIA will be 45 years old in 2024. Hybrid and Digital Internships topic appears in many degree courses alongside the theme of innovation and sustainability. Even those who do not work in the digital sector are affected for some reason and it is no coincidence that the World Economic Forum predicts that every 20 years more than half of the jobs will be new and mainly related to the digital world.

Here are two quotes from the following speeches:

- *"It is of the utmost importance that local governments work with universities, businesses and civil society to achieve the best outcomes for communities. We really appreciate the support and innovation proposed through the Model for hybrid and digital internships"* - **Alfonso Antoniozzi**, Deputy Mayor of the Municipality of Viterbo.
- *"The Chamber of Commerce of Rieti - Viterbo is honoured to support and actively participate in this project, recognizing the importance of the digital approach in the internship sector. We believe that this project can be a milestone in creating a new internship experience through digital innovation. Training is crucial for us, and we hope that everyone will actively participate in this conference, bringing ideas and considerations on this important topic. Thank you all for coming, we wish you a productive day's work."* - **Francesco Monzillo**, secretary general of the Chamber of Commerce of Rieti – Viterbo.

- *"It is with great interest that I participate in this conference, sending greetings from the president of the Italian Special Agency, **Enza Bufacchi**. I recognize the importance of the Erasmus experience, having personally experienced it in Berlin, and I encourage everyone to actively pursue these opportunities for European participation and collaboration in order to broaden their horizons. We are excited to join this project and guarantee our continued support, with the commitment of the Special Agency 'Central Italy' in the involvement in the project" - **Michele Casadei**, Vice President of Central Italy, Special Agency of the Chamber of Commerce of Rieti – Viterbo.*

Jana Roze, Deputy Director of the College of Business Administration (BKV) in Latvia, and creator of the European project DIM4HE, expressed gratitude to those present for embracing the idea of the hybrid and digital internship model, which was born in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic to address the challenges of implementing distance internships.

The first panel of the conference focused **on the future of higher education and the role of internships** was attended remotely by the Vice-Chancellor of the Technical University of Riga, **Mr Atis Kapenieks**, with over 25 years of experience in managing distance education, shared his vision on digital transformation for higher education. He stressed the importance of anticipating the needs of the next 20 years, addressing the need to learn faster and supporting the growth of knowledge productivity.

Ivars Ījabs, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Technical University of Riga and Member of the European Parliament, addressed the topic of digitalization in higher education. He emphasized the importance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the key role of the "**AI Act**" in regulating the use of technologies in teaching. It highlighted the opportunities offered by AI in personalizing teaching, language learning, and STEM subjects, but it also raised challenges such as philosophical discussion about teaching and preserving languages that are underrepresented in data. He proposed a comprehensive approach to mitigate AI-related risks and concluded with the hope of a productive event.

Paivi Aarreniemi-Jokipelto, lecturer at the Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Finland, emphasized the importance of developing digital skills, digital soft skills, and entrepreneurial skills in future graduates, and emphasized the importance of including practical experiences to stimulate an entrepreneurial mindset in students. In response to a question from the audience, he finally mentioned the European Framework of Reference for Entrepreneurial Skills, known as the "**Edu Comp**", as a useful tool for teaching the entrepreneurial mindset, considering it an excellent starting point for designing programs and learning opportunities that develop entrepreneurial skills.

Edite Kalnina, Head of Human Resources at Latvian state-owned enterprise VAS "Vaslsts nekustamie ipasumi" (Latvia), shared the company's perspective on the importance of internships, both traditional and digital, highlighting the innovation of online projects in her organization. He recognized the benefits of digital internships, although it is important to curate students' technological readiness, with the skills needed to tackle digital internship experiences and the health and safety associated with virtual internships. The presentation highlighted the complexities and challenges of effectively implementing digital internships in the business context.

Davide De Lucis, founder of Whead.it (based in Italy), presented his company as a JobTech Company specialized in ICT & Digital projects and tasks, operating in hybrid and fully remote mode since 2015. He illustrated Wh's artificial intelligence platform focused on Hiring, Training and HR Management.

Danilo Troncarelli, expert in International Digital Strategies and Entrepreneurship, shared some of his experiences as an investor and entrepreneur related to his involvement with large digital players such as Accenture, underlining the importance of considering the expectations and needs of young people in the development of internships and educational programs and urged to pay attention to working conditions and distance learning to ensure equity and opportunities for everybody.

Signe Enkuzena, Director of the College of Business Administration (BKV), Latvia, shared some perspectives for digital education. Based on a 2020 survey, it found that 34% of students choose online education for convenience, 24% to balance work and family, and 42% for the lower cost compared to on-site education. She therefore concluded her speech by stressing the importance of student-centred service, the quality of the program and the competence-based training approach to maintain competitiveness in the education sector.

Janis Supe, Deputy Director of the College of Business Administration and General Coordinator of the European DIM-4-HE project, introduced the work for the second Panel of the conference, introducing the DIM-4-HE project and outlining the importance of the model created to support the management of hybrid and digital internships and intended for higher education institutions, host companies and students/trainees. Janis Supe invited interested parties to visit the project website (<https://dim4he.mii.lv/it>), and to provide an assessment through a short survey, available in four languages.

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Afterwards, three students from the "*Leonardo da Vinci*" Technical High Educational Institute in Viterbo were invited to share their opinions on the internship model during the conference. Everyone explored with interest the idea of carrying out an internship and also expressed interest in future opportunities abroad. They stressed the importance of wanting to pursue one's aspirations, but to improve language skills and broaden job prospects.

Markus Weiland, Managing Director of the Finnish company Workseed, which specializes in the development of learning management systems, presented the digital platform developed with a specific focus on vocational training and widely used by universities in Finland and elsewhere, with more than 120,000 trainees in operation. He presented a case study with the University of Applied Sciences of Eastern Finland, highlighting the improved visibility of students' skills and motivation to report daily activities. The platform offers a mobile-friendly app, allowing students to report activities, define learning goals, and build a portfolio, in concert with the host company's tutors and contacts.

Nedas Jurgaitis, Deputy Director of the Šiaulių valstybinė kolegija / Higher Education Institution (Lithuania) stressed the importance of the flexibility offered by digital internships, also considering the adaptability of the younger generations, digital natives. The flexibility in time management and the geographical diversity that hybrid and digital internships can embrace are additional benefits to consider. However, challenges such as limited adaptation for students of certain disciplines with manual skills such as medicine, engineering, etc., and lack of face-to-face communication could lead to misunderstandings and similarly the dependence on a stable internet connection and the technology itself, are to be kept in mind. N. Jurgaitis sees digital internships as a pioneering pilot project and looks forward to future technological advances, seeing the DIM-4-HE project as an important step towards the future of education.

Liga Roke-Reimate from the College of Business Administration (BVK) in Latvia, shared **6 key principles** to improve the impact of internships. The first principle is "**Meaningfulness**," emphasizing the importance of making internship goals and tasks meaningful to students. The second principle is the importance of "**Engagement with others**," implying the need to involve supervisors and colleagues. The third principle highlights the value of "**Working with diverse individuals**" to enrich the student experience. The fourth principle focuses on "**Receiving feedback**," which is considered crucial in work-based learning, with an emphasis on the regularity of assessments. The fifth principle promotes the "**Application of knowledge in new situations**," encouraging students to perform tasks in various work situations. The sixth and final

principle is "**Self-reflection**," emphasizing the importance of self-evaluation and journals describing the experience conducted.

Inete Ielite, then gave the floor to **Paola Gatta**, Head of the Student and Postgraduate Services Office of the University of Tuscia, with consolidated experience in traditional internships in Italy. Paola Gatta illustrated the traditional path for internships in the Italian context, highlighting the regulations in force for curricular and extracurricular internships, the latter aimed at graduates. He illustrated the management of curricular internships within the 6 Departments of the University of TUSCIA (UNITUS), emphasizing the stipulation of agreements at departmental level for internships that can have a duration that can vary from 2 to 6 months, with a mandatory monthly reimbursement of expenses by the host companies, which varies according to the region to which they belong. Finally, Paola Gatta emphasized the professionalizing objective of internships that starts from the care and presentation of CVs, highlighting the crucial role of the Student and Postgraduate Services Office in facilitating this important phase of the training course.

Angélico Contreiras, representative of the University of Lusófona (Portugal), expressed the importance of the DIM-4-HE project as a response to the challenges encountered during the Covid-19 pandemic, which prevented students from carrying out internships. He therefore underlined the alignment of the project with the strategic objectives of the university in terms of internationalization, innovation and inclusion and concluded his speech by quoting the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, expressing hope and encouragement for personal and professional growth through the implementation of the model created.

The speech through video clips of **Santa Survila**, a graduate of the Business College Administration - BVK, (Latvia) who uses a wheelchair for her mobility, underlined the importance of internships within the Erasmus+ program for the enhancement of students' cultural experiences and skills and the need to consider the DIM-4-HE model in the perspective of diversity and inclusion.

Inete Ielite concluded the conference by thanking all the participants, praising the active participation of those present and the success of the project thanks to the contribution of all the partners, speakers and technical staff, hoping for the development of future collaborative successes.



Projection of the QRcodes for the validation of the Model for hybrid and digital internships, during the DIM4HE conference.