Policy Brief

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Integration of Work-based Learning in
Peace, Conflict and Security Studies (INCOPS)

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**Integration of Work-based Learning
in Conflict, Peace and Security Studies (INCOPS)**

The integration of practical experiences into university curricula has become a standard across various disciplines and study programmes. However, there is often still a gap between theory and the training of analytical skills on the one hand and practical experiences, which students gain at workplaces and during internships, on the other hand. Peace, Conflict and Security Studies are no exception in this regard, even though scholars and employers have stressed the necessity for a closer integration of theory and practice. This is of particular importance for programmes that aim to qualify for a career in the field of peacebuilding, foreign and security policy, or conflict resolution. INCOPS proposes a more comprehensive and systematic approach to overcome existing limitations. INCOPS develops and apply a tailored concept of the Work-based Learning approach to systematically integrate theory and practice in university teaching and curriculum development with a particular focus on the role of internships and voluntary work.

Project Partners:
University of Marburg (DE), Center for Conflict Studies [coordinating institution]
Babeș-Bolyai University (RO), Centre for International Cooperation
University of Coimbra (PT), Faculty of Economics
University of Coventry (GB), Centre for Trust, Peace, and Social Relations
University of Kent (GB), School of Politics and International Relations
Utrecht University (NL), Centre for Conflict Studies

Executive Summary

This policy brief is the result of research and exchange during the implementation of the project 'Integration of Work-based Learning in Peace, Conflict and Security Studies (INCOPS)", which involved partners from Babes-Bolyai University, Coventry University, University of Coimbra, University of Kent, University of Marburg (coordinator) and Utrecht University between 2020 and 2023. Focusing on the field of Peace, Conflict and Security Studies (PCS), the project aimed at optimising Work-based Learning (WBL) models and aligning academic objectives with the needs of the workplace in order to bridge the gap between education and employers' requirements and contribute to facilitating integration into the world of work. Building and sharing knowledge, fostering networks and better preparing all stakeholders for the demanding world of work were at the heart of our project. Below are some of the good practices we identified along the way.

Best practices for the integration of WBL in PCS:

Administration: In the INCOPS project, the focus on administration high-lighted the need to establish or improve support structures for student place-ments. This includes the development of comprehensive guidelines and reg-ulations, particularly with regard to ethical considerations. It also highlighted the importance of fostering robust communication and partnerships between MA courses and various stakeholders, such as organisations providing placements. This approach aims to streamline and optimise the administrative aspect of WBL.

Ethics: A key recommendation from the INCOPS findings is the development of explicit written policies on ethics and safety for students during their placements. These policies should not only be comprehensive, but also effectively communicated to both students and stakeholders. The aim is to ensure that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of the ethical standards and safety measures in place, thereby promoting a safe and responsible learning environment during placements.

Expectations: The project emphasises the importance of setting clear expectations at the beginning of a placement. This includes the development of a learning agreement, to be signed by the student, the university and stakeholders, detailing the intended learning outcomes of the placement. Such a learning agreement helps to align the objectives of all parties involved and sets a clear framework for the learning experience, ensuring that the placement is both educational and beneficial for the student.

Communication: In the context of university consortia such as INCOPS, effective communication is crucial, especially when reflecting on placements. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has been identified as an appropriate platform for this purpose. COIL facilitates the sharing of experiences and insights between students and teachers, enhancing the overall learning experience and fostering a deeper understanding of WBL in PCS.

Feedback: Effective management of internship programmes requires an integrated approach to feedback. This includes regular reports from interns, which can be used to refine future internship experiences. The inclusion of workshops and mentoring by former trainees for new trainees is also recomended. This approach not only facilitates the exchange of experience and feedback, both online and in person, but also helps to build a supportive and informative network for interns.

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As previous research has shown, internship experiences tend to have a positive effect on academic and career-related outcomes, regardless of academic discipline or demographic attributes such as gender or ethnic background (Binder, Baguley, Cook, and Miller, 2015). Internships are widely recognised as beneficial for future employment (Blau et al., 2017), as they provide students with valuable experience and insight into their expectations (Brooks et al., 1995), as well as opportunities for students to gain knowledge about potential job prospects after completing their BA and MA studies (Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013).

This policy brief proposes to focus on a multi-level participatory design approach model for the effective implementation of an internship programme, and asserts that it can be applied to both pre- and post-internship settings. The aim is to focus on gathering input from different stakeholders, including students, alumni, placement providers and other key actors such as academics and administrators. The underlying idea of this policy paper is that a focus on continuous participation and feedback is essential to increase the effectiveness of internship programmes in making them valuable and potentially impactful experiences for students after their education.

Internships are widely seen as important learning opportunities for students, as they contribute significantly to students' self-exploration by enabling them to acquire essential practical skills in the field of Peace, Conflict and Security Studies (PCS) and enhance their sense of independence and interpersonal skills. According to Sauder et al. (2019), there is a wide range of expectations from students, supervisors and other stakeholders regarding internship programmes. The IN-COPS project was primarily motivated by the growing interest in developing and promoting the use of inventive pedagogical tools, ethical approaches, and technological tools to improve student learning outcomes related to internships in PCS. For example, faculty supervisors and placement coordinators are frequently and increasingly using new methods and technological platforms, online applications and similar tools, to transform the ways in which students' experiential learning is managed during their placements. Therefore, the purpose of the policy recommendations presented here is to provide internship coordinators, faculty supervisors and other stakeholders with essential insights and ideas for developing effective teaching and assessment practices. It is quite likely that the achievement of beneficial interactive and experiential learning methods through work placements can be achieved through collaboration.

Therefore, this policy brief proposes the use of a participatory design approach model for the effective implementation of an internship programme. Furthermore, this model can be extended to include pre- and post-internship activities. A key benefit is the opportunity to gain vital input from a range of stakeholders, including students, alumni, academic and administrative staff. This feedback is key to improving the implementation and effectiveness of internship programmes and making them relevant tools and opportunities to consolidate students' training in PCS. The active participation of students and stakeholders is expected in the process of improving the learning outcomes of placements and aligning them with the educational objectives of the university. The incorporation of a participatory design approach has the potential to enhance the support provided to students during their placement. This can be achieved through the implementation of a learning design that includes relevant learning activities, collaborative and communicative practices, as well as the monitoring of learning processes.

The selection of appropriate platforms for managing and facilitating the exchange of students' learning and emotional support during their placement is a crucial factor to be considered. However, it is equally important to consider formal and informal comments from students and university stakeholders when selecting the most appropriate placement in the field of PCS. For example, while peer-to-peer discussions, academic recommendations and blogs can be used to optimise experiential learning during placements, social media technologies appear to be a

more efficient means of facilitating the dissemination of students' placement experiences.

It is recommended that faculty supervisors use both online and offline methods to assess the extent to which the learning outcomes of the placement have been achieved. It is essential to use a combination of informal, formal and summative assessment methods in order to obtain empirical data on the effectiveness of the placement programme. During the INCOPS project, it was suggested that the proportion of the overall mark allocated to formal criteria should be reduced. The inclusion of this evaluation activity has been effective in encouraging students to reflect and share their personal experiences. However, variations in students' work schedules and the scope of their projects may affect the regularity with which they submit their logs. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the proposed recommendation in order to enable students to pay more attention to the process of knowledge acquisition.

In the survey conducted as part of the project, the majority of students perceive participation in a placement as beneficial, but there is still a minority of students who hold opposing views, claiming that a compulsory and bureaucratic placement has little benefit for their professional development as specialists in the field of PCS. It is also recommended that faculty supervisors provide more and continuous support regarding the development of ethical approaches during the placement. Furthermore, it is worth noting that faculty supervisors may consider the implementation of gamification techniques within the preparation process, such as the provision of badge prizes (Chu, 2014). This strategy aims to increase student motivation and foster a more enjoyable and engaging learning environment for learners.

Faculty supervisors are encouraged to provide additional support to students, including assistance in identifying suitable internship opportunities to apply theories learned in PCS. In addition to academic activities, students often need support with pre-internship tasks. Conducting workshops that focus on real-life situations, in the era of CV and cover letter writing, as well as interview skills, will greatly improve a student's ability to secure an internship. Some students

say that courses focusing on management skills are beneficial in some PCS programmes. To address this issue, it may be necessary to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the curriculum of existing programmes and then make appropriate changes. In addition to their primary responsibilities, placement coordinators and faculty directors have the opportunity to organise interdepartmental dialogue on the management of placement programmes. In the absence of a universal formula applicable to all PCS programmes and departments or educational institutions, supervisors will need to follow different routes to suit their own objectives and needs. Sharing good practice can lead to beneficial results and improve the overall understanding of training and internship delivery.

In summary, the following actions are recommended for faculty supervisors and placement coordinators (cf. also Chu, 2020):

- Participatory design approach: The INCOPS project recommends using a participatory design approach to continuously improve the internship programme. This involves gathering feedback from students, alumni, faculty, staff and workplace supervisors. For example, feedback reports from interns can be used to refine future internship experiences by incorporating workshops and mentoring from previous interns for new interns, ensuring a cycle of continuous improvement and relevant learning experiences.
- Use (social) media tools: (Social) media platforms are recognised for their educational benefits, particularly in measuring the achievement of internship learning outcomes. Their popularity and effectiveness in facilitating knowledge sharing, emotional support and engagement surpasses traditional course management platforms. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is proposed as an ideal platform for this purpose, promoting a participatory, design-based model that engages students, alumni, faculty supervisors and workplace supervisors in shaping learning outcomes. Tools such as COIL and Padlet can be used effectively for this purpose.

- Additional support for students: Providing comprehensive support to students both before and after the internship is crucial. This includes supporting students to identify opportunities, conducting CV and cover letter workshops and preparing them for interviews. Strengthening administrative support structures for internships, developing clear guidelines and regulations, and improving communication and partnerships between MA programmes and stakeholders are also recommended.
- Curriculum review: Regular review of relevant courses, such as communication skills, fieldwork and ethics, is necessary to ensure that they provide the technical skills needed for internships. Regular updating of course content, including references to internships and fieldwork, is essential to keep the curriculum in line with the dynamic demands of the professional environment.
- Sharing internship experiences: Encouraging students to share their internship experiences and provide feedback is important to avoid misleading content. Encouraging students to blog about their placement experiences and share content on social media before, during and after the placement can be effective in this regard.
- Gamification in pre-internship preparation: Incorporating elements of gamification or role-playing into pre-internship preparation can significantly increase student engagement and learning. The use of elements such as gamerscore, leaderboards, medals and bonus products can make the learning process more enjoyable and effective. Video tutorials and reward systems, as suggested by Basher (2023), can be incorporated to enhance this approach.
- Sharing best practice: Sharing best practices for managing internship programmes with faculty supervisors and internship coordinators is essential. The INCOPS consortium serves as a model for this, demonstrating the effectiveness of collaborative sharing of best practices in improving internship management.
- Ethics and regulation: Integrating an ethics plan into all internship activities and plans is essential. This ensures that all internship experiences adhere to the highest ethical standards and provide a safe and responsible environment for students to learn and grow professionally.
- Intercultural practices: The use of intercultural practices, such as role-playing and simulation exercises, during the placement preparation phase can prepare students for diverse work environments. This approach promotes cultural sensitivity and adaptability, essential skills in today's globalised world.
- Intervention in situations of danger and crisis: Recognising and intervening in crisis situations is a critical aspect of placement management. The assessment of a student in crisis usually involves a discussion, which is crucial to ensure the safety and well-being of students during their placement.

University administrators offer support in the implementation of a wide range of effective logistical, psychological and pedagogical approaches aimed at enhancing students' educational experiences. One potential avenue for collaboration is to promote the use of a participatory design approach within academic faculties to effectively oversee placement programmes across many disciplines. Several faculty members have the authority to direct internship coordinators to consistently seek input from students, alumni, faculty internship supervisors and workplace supervisors. The purpose of seeking this feedback is to ensure that the learning outcomes of placements are appropriately aligned with the educational objectives of PCS. It is recommended that academic management provide support to programmes that offer work placement courses. For example, organisations may consider the possibility of increasing their administrative staff or setting up internship programmes. University management (rectors and deans) have the power to redistribute or reduce the teaching load of lecturers who are responsible for supervising internship courses, thus allowing more time for the provision of vital student support.

It is recommended that policymakers consider the possible introduction of incentive initiatives,

such as grants, to support faculty internship supervisors and coordinators in their exploration of innovative internship techniques. These techniques are specifically designed to enhance students' experiential learning throughout their internship experience. The formal recognition of learning is of paramount importance in the evaluation of staff performance. The application of these novel and methodical techniques has the capacity to make a valuable contribution to educational progress. The aforementioned phenomenon has the capacity to initiate a gradual change in the culture of the institution, leading to the widespread adoption of innovative teaching methods by faculty and staff members, ultimately culminating in improved student academic performance (Chu & Mok, 2016).

The potential to increase the confidence of faculty supervisors in the proper use of platforms and social media for internship purposes can be achieved through the implementation of a training programme. In addition, it is imperative to evaluate the impact of these initiatives in supporting academic internship supervisors to enhance their skills in effectively coordinating, implementing, evaluating and improving an internship programme.

This response seeks to provide robust evidence on several new and effective pedagogical approaches that have the potential to improve student learning outcomes. One notable endeavour is the use of a participatory design methodology in the management of work placement programmes.

One potential approach to improving student support is to reduce the teaching workload of lecturers who are also supervising work placement courses. This can be achieved either by reducing their teaching load or by seeking support from administrative staff.

The proposal advocates the introduction of an incentive scheme for faculty placement supervisors and/or coordinators to encourage the adoption of new pedagogies designed to enhance students' experiential learning during placements.

The aim is to develop and implement training programmes for faculty members who supervise placements, with particular emphasis on the use of the participatory design process and the integration of social media tools to enhance the management of placements.

The study conducted by Chu and Mok (2016) highlights the importance of organisational transformation in the higher education industry. This reform encompasses several dimensions, including structural changes such as the provision of additional funding for teaching-related objectives, pedagogical advances involving the implementation of innovative teaching methods, and organisational adaptations aimed at facilitating the widespread integration of these novel pedagogies.

The existing literature on this topic is somewhat sparse, with only a limited number of studies exploring the potential benefits associated with the adoption of novel strategies in the delivery of placement programmes. We encourage future studies and research to explore and develop the effectiveness of actively involving students and key stakeholders, including workplace supervisors and faculty administrators, in developing a meaningful placement learning experience for students. Researchers are encouraged to investigate the precise mechanisms that underlie the anticipated benefits of using novel design methodologies to optimise students' educational experiences during work placements.

It is strongly recommended that future research evaluates both current and future technologies, as well as the impact of new interactive pedagogical tools, in order to align learning outcomes with educational objectives and facilitate the achievement of placement learning outcomes. The importance of this issue is reinforced by the emergence of new placement formats, such as hybrid placements. Further research is needed to explore the educational benefits of professional online platforms, such as LinkedIn or Microsoft Teams, in the context of higher education institutions. Furthermore, it is important to explore the potential usefulness of these platforms in the context of internships. McBride et al. (2018) examined the issue of e-portfolio assessment and suggested that additional training should be provided to students to promote consistency in the use of internships.

Furthermore, there is a valid rationale for conducting additional research on the use of online platforms in educational and internship contexts.

The existing literature presents a wide range of strategies for achieving desired learning outcomes in the context of work placements. Many academic institutions emphasise the importance of fostering a robust partnership in the interaction between placement managers and faculty placement coordinators. In most academic institutions, it is common practice for students to participate in routine face-to-face or online meetings with their faculty supervisors to address any challenges they may encounter during their internships or in their professional settings (Boyce, Greer, Blair, & Davids, 2012; Cheng, Tang, & Cheng, 2012). Although this specific approach may be considered acceptable for internship placement, recent academic literature (Petit & Ntebutse, 2017) has highlighted the importance of developing cost-effective and innovative strategies for supervising interns and managing internship programmes.

It is understandable that it is not possible to make significant improvements to a placement programme in a single semester or even a year. The successful implementation of a new technique requires a sustained and collaborative effort. The process of continuous evaluation and overcoming of challenges in work experience programmes is of great importance as it contributes to the enrichment of our knowledge about creative ways. By fostering collaboration between key stakeholders in an internship programme, such as policy makers, faculty internship coordinators, faculty supervisors, workplace supervisors, alumni and students, the participatory design-based model has the potential to generate valuable insights for improving pedagogical and assessment practices. Undoubtedly, the adoption of a participatory design approach has significant implications that are attractive not only to administrators and academic supervisors, but also to students.

The INCOPS project highlights this potential to provide guidance to faculty members involved in PCS internship programmes, enabling them to improve programme delivery on an ongoing basis. The process begins by ensuring that students have the necessary knowledge and skills relevant to their chosen placement. They are also taught essential job-seeking skills such as writing a CV and covering letter, conducting thorough company research and preparing for interviews. Assistance is also provided in finding a suitable internship opportunity and in preparing students for the transition to a professional work environment. At the outset of student placements, it is imperative that faculty supervisors ensure that students are assigned tasks that meet professional standards. It is essential that mechanisms are put in place to allow students to seek support from their work supervisor, faculty supervisor or peers as needed. The facilitation of knowledge exchange among students during placements can be enhanced by faculty members who actively promote the dissemination of acquired knowledge among peers, fostering a collaborative learning environment that allows for the mutual benefit of shared experiences. The effective integration of formative and summative assessment during student placements is essential to maximise the educational benefits of this valuable learning experience.

Coordinating internship programmes requires a significant investment of energy and time from all those involved, and this can sometimes reduce interest and motivation on the part of faculty. It is strongly recommended that policy makers and administrators in universities and higher education institutions allocate significant resources – both financial and human – to enable faculty supervisors to provide a valuable internship experience that promotes practical learning for students. In order to reduce the workload of academics managing work placements, university administrators may wish to consider alternative solutions. These could include relieving faculty members of certain teaching and administrative responsibilities. The rationale for this consideration is that internships, unlike traditional courses within a specific programme, involve additional administrative responsibilities. The primary responsibilities of faculty supervisors are to interact with student interns, to provide constructive feedback on their internship-related tasks, and to offer guidance and encouragement to students who encounter obstacles in achieving their expected learning outcomes or a

satisfactory experience. It is also important to note that faculty supervisors devote a significant amount of time to supporting PCS students who are struggling to secure or manage a placement. They also play a crucial role in ensuring that interns' performance is evaluated by their supervisors in a timely manner. By providing sufficient support to faculty supervisors in the management of placement courses, they can provide an optimal learning experience for all students enrolled in the placement programme.

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