

# ALMOST A YEAR OF ONLINE INTERNSHIPS: FOUR LESSONS

Online internships are different, but not necessarily worse, says Jenneke Heising, university teacher and internship coordinator at Food Sciences. Four lessons learned from almost a year of online internships.

When the Netherlands went into the first coronavirus lockdown in March 2020, a lot of students were just about to start internships. Heising: 'About 150 students suddenly needed a new placement. Food Sciences students often do internships at food companies, factories or laboratories. And it became very difficult to do an internship at precisely those kinds of locations. We considered alternatives, such as a second thesis, but for several reasons that was not our favourite option: there is quite a bit more pressure on lab space on campus because of the coronavirus measures; the teachers were too busy to supervise even more theses; and the learning goals are different for a thesis. So we thought: if teaching can continue online, internships can too. We looked into what students could do from home: simulations, calculations, extracting data from literature, consumer research using surveys, and so on. There are countless ways of doing a worthwhile internship from home.'

## Good supervision by the company is essential

It is crucial that the company provides good supervision, says Heising. 'The assignment itself is just part of what an internship is all about. It's also about

the social side of things and learning to understand the organization. As an intern, you learn to work in a professional environment with people from different backgrounds. For instance, you might need to work with somebody from marketing, or to be able to talk to a supplier. Companies have to actively involve interns, by doing things like having them join the team's morning meeting.'

## Blended internships

When the coronavirus measures were relaxed last summer, a lot of online internships were turned into blended internships. Heising: 'In that case you might work from home one week and the next week on location. At the moment



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we are back in lockdown and that is difficult, but if it's possible to do it safely again soon, we encourage this approach. Getting to know your colleagues offline and being around in the office often has a positive impact on your affinity with that company.'

## Don't be scared of the term 'Covid generation'

Some students are worried about being part of the Covid generation: the generation of students that has studied largely at home and does not have much hands-on experience. Heising: 'We've asked leaders from the food industry whether they consider online internships and education to be of less value. They said, absolutely not. In their view, the quality of education is still very high and the current generation of students is much more used to working online. They do think it's important that practicals are still taught on campus. These students are in many ways better prepared for the future than the workers already at these companies. So there are things that are different, but not necessarily worse.' LZ

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