



***Enhancing Internship Program Quality: A Comprehensive Needs Assessment Based on the Experiences of Malta, Italy, and Ireland***

***In frame of the project: QUALITY- Enhancing quality of internship programs through experience sharing among sending and hosting organizations in Europe***

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# Introduction

This needs assessment examines the strengths and challenges of internship programs within the European context, focusing specifically on the experiences of Malta, Italy, and Ireland. Internship programs serve as critical platforms for equipping young people with practical skills and professional knowledge, helping them navigate the transition from education to employment. However, variations in program structure, accessibility, and quality often affect the extent to which these opportunities meet the expectations of interns and the needs of host organizations. This analysis is rooted in comprehensive surveys and qualitative feedback from stakeholders, including educational institutions, vocational training providers, interns, and employers. The goal is to uncover the underlying factors that shape internship experiences, such as recruitment strategies, the quality of mentorship, and the adequacy of financial and logistical support. Challenges like resource constraints, cultural differences, and mismatched expectations often create barriers to achieving the full potential of these programs.

The findings presented aim to provide actionable insights that enhance the value of internship programs for all participants. The assessment emphasizes creating pathways for more structured, inclusive, and impactful internships that not only prepare young professionals for the workforce but also contribute to the long-term development of organizations and the broader labor market. This work represents a collective effort to ensure internships are transformative experiences for participants and sustainable practices for institutions.

## Methodology for the Baseline Study in the "QUALITY"

The methodology for this baseline study is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these programs function and how they can be enhanced to improve quality and participant experience. This study, which focuses on Malta, Italy, and Ireland, investigates critical aspects of internship programs, including recruitment, training, supervision, evaluation, and compensation. The research employs a mixed-methods approach and combines literature review, surveys and focus group discussions, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative insights. The literature review provides a critical framework for understanding recurring issues and highlights effective strategies implemented in different contexts. The survey administration phase gathers quantitative data to explore the challenges and best practices associated with internships in Italy, Malta and Ireland. Surveys are conducted in each participating country and target three key groups: sending and hosting organisations, interns and tutors and are administered by project partners in their respective countries. They collect data on a range of issues, including recruitment processes, intern training, supervision quality, performance evaluation practices, and compensation structures and the results provide statistical insights that underpin the analysis of program effectiveness and areas for improvement. To complement the survey data, focus group discussions and individual meetings are conducted with diverse stakeholders, including tutors, interns, employers, and host organizations aiming to gather qualitative insights, capturing detailed personal experiences and perspectives that illuminate the nuances of internship practices.

The quantitative analysis is based on survey data collected from a diverse target group to capture a comprehensive understanding of internship programs across Italy, Malta, and Ireland. Furthermore, the same target group has been reached out through interviews and focus group discussions including three key stakeholder groups:

*Sending Organizations:* 30 organizations in each country was reached out, including educational institutions, VET providers, public employment agencies, NGOs, and business associations, participated through surveys, focus groups, and case studies. Their insights provided valuable information on the challenges and best practices in the operation of internship programs.

*Internship Participants:* 30 participants in each country were involved offering critical reflections on their personal experiences, highlighting the strengths and areas for improvement in internship programs.

*Host Organizations and Tutors:* 20 host organizations and tutors in each country contributed through surveys, focus groups, and case studies.

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## **Contribution to project objectives**

This baseline study directly supports project objectives by:

### *SO1 – Experience Sharing and Best Practices*

The study's findings facilitate the exchange of effective strategies and best practices across European internship programs. By identifying successful features, organizations can design and refine internships, benefiting both interns and hosting organizations.

### *SO2 – Guideline Development for Internship Programs*

The study provides crucial data for developing guidelines that align with the needs of interns, tutors, employers, and sending organizations. These guidelines address identified challenges and promote effective practices, helping programs meet the expectations of all stakeholders.

### *SO3 – Strengthening Collaboration and Communication*

Building a shared understanding of internship program challenges and opportunities encourages collaboration between countries and organizations, enhancing program effectiveness and fostering quality improvements across internship programs.

# Introduction to the QUALITY project

The QUALITY project is a focused initiative developed under the VET program of Erasmus+, co-funded by the European Commission (2023-1-MT01-KA210-VET-000164653 — Enhancing quality of internship programs through experience sharing among sending and hosting organizations in Europe), aiming to enhance the quality of internship programs in Europe. The project seeks to improve standards through better collaboration and alignment with the needs of interns, organizations, and other stakeholders involved in the process. The project encourages the sharing of experiences and best practices among sending and hosting organizations across Europe. This exchange is expected to improve the overall quality of internship programs through practical insights and tested approaches. It also includes the creation of guidelines (as part of another activity in frame of the project QUALITY) designed to address the specific needs and expectations of interns, tutors, employees, and the organizations facilitating these programs. Strengthening collaboration and communication between organizations is another key objective, promoting a more connected and efficient network to support internship development. To achieve these objectives, the project includes a series of structured activities. Management, coordination, and quality assurance will ensure smooth implementation. The present baseline study investigates the challenges and best practices of internship programs in the partner European countries: Malta, Italy and Ireland, offering valuable data to inform subsequent efforts which will lead to the creation of a handbook that will provide clear guidance for stakeholders, reflecting their shared needs and experiences. Masterclasses that will be organized in the three partner countries: Malta, Italy and Ireland will bring together representatives from sending and hosting organizations, tutors, and employers in the targeted countries to foster practical learning and dialogue. Dissemination efforts will promote the project's outputs, ensuring they are accessible and useful to a broad audience. The anticipated outcomes of the project include enhanced internship quality in three targeted countries, better collaboration and communication between organizations, and a more rewarding learning experience for interns. These results aim to improve the reputation of both sending and hosting organizations, increasing their ability to attract participants and provide meaningful opportunities. The QUALITY project represents a practical and modest contribution to the continuous improvement of internships within the framework of the Erasmus+ VET program, focusing on tangible results and collaboration among stakeholders.

# Internship programs in a nutshell

The section below gives a short overview of how the internship programs works in each of the partner countries of the project:

## MALTA

Internship programs in Malta are a crucial element of the nation's strategy to enhance employability and align education with labor market needs. As a small island state with a service-oriented economy, Malta has focused on integrating internships into vocational education and training (VET) frameworks to provide students with hands-on experience in key industries such as tourism, financial services, and IT. The legal, institutional, and policy frameworks governing internships in Malta reflect a commitment to quality and accessibility while addressing challenges such as limited placement opportunities and supervision quality.

### Legal and Policy Frameworks

Malta's internship programs are regulated under the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF), which aligns with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to ensure consistency in educational and vocational standards. This alignment guarantees that internships contribute to recognized qualifications, supporting students' progression within their chosen fields. The Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) serves as the national EQAVET (European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training) reference point, promoting quality assurance in VET internships by setting benchmarks and conducting evaluations (MFHEA). The Work-Based Learning Scheme integrates internships as a mandatory part of vocational curricula, ensuring students gain practical experience that complements their theoretical education. This scheme reflects Malta's focus on structured internships as a bridge between education and employment, aligning training with national economic priorities (CEDEFOP). To address youth unemployment, Malta participates in EU initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee Scheme and Erasmus+ programs enhancing opportunities for students to access internships across sectors (MFHEA).

### Quality Assurance Mechanisms

The quality assurance of internships in Malta is overseen by the MFHEA, which evaluates and accredits educational and vocational institutions. Through the EQAVET framework, the authority ensures that internships align with both educational objectives and industry standards, promoting accountability among stakeholders. Agreements between educational institutions, students, and host organizations outline clear roles and responsibilities, creating a structured environment for learning and development (MFHEA). Work-based learning programs are also subject to continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure compliance with the National Quality Assurance Framework.

## Industry Collaboration and Sectoral Relevance

The close collaboration between educational institutions and industries in Malta is a key factor in the success of internships. Prominent sectors such as tourism, hospitality, and financial services provide well-established pathways for VET students, ensuring alignment between educational programs and labor market needs. Organizations like Stage Malta facilitate internships tailored to individual career goals, offering opportunities across various industries (Stage Malta).

Despite this progress, the diversity of placements remains a challenge. Opportunities in emerging industries such as green technology and advanced IT are limited compared to traditional sectors, constraining students' exposure to innovative fields. Programs such as Erasmus+ and initiatives by NSTS Malta aim to expand the scope of internships, providing students with international and cross-sectoral experiences (NSTS Malta).

## Challenges in Malta's Internship System

Several challenges limit the effectiveness of internship programs in Malta. The limited availability of placements in emerging industries restricts diversity in professional opportunities. Smaller organizations often lack the resources to provide adequate supervision and mentorship, as noted in CEDEFOP's reports on Malta's VET landscape ([CEDEFOP, 2023](#)). Furthermore, economic and logistical barriers also hinder equal access. Programs like the Youth Guarantee Scheme alleviate some financial burdens, but disparities remain, particularly for interns in rural or underserved areas ([Youth Guarantee Scheme Overview](#)).

## ITALY

Internships in Italy, referred to as *tirocini*, are a critical component of the country's VET sector. These programs are designed to bridge the gap between education and employment, equipping students and graduates with practical skills and industry exposure. Shaped by Italy's regulatory framework and economic landscape, internships within the VET sector aim to align educational outcomes with labor market demands.

## Legal and Policy Frameworks

The Italian internship system operates within a complex legal structure that combines national legislation with regional governance. Legislative Decree No. 81/2015 provides the foundational framework for professional training contracts and apprenticeships, setting nationwide standards for the design and delivery of internships. These standards distinguish between curricular internships, which are integrated into formal education, and extracurricular internships, which are intended for professional development post-education (Legislative Decree No. 81/2015). The Conferenza Stato-Regioni framework further refines the regulation of internships, enabling regions to adapt programs to local



economic priorities. For example, Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna have leveraged this framework to develop targeted VET internship initiatives in sectors such as advanced manufacturing and fashion (Conferenza Stato-Regioni-<https://www.statoregioni.it/it/presentazione/attivita/conferenza-stato-regioni/>). However, this regional autonomy also leads to variability in implementation, with southern regions often lagging due to limited resources and weaker economic infrastructure (OECD). Italy's commitment to the European Union's Youth Guarantee program has led to the implementation of the Garanzia Giovani initiative, which aims to combat youth unemployment through structured VET internships. This initiative provides financial incentives to employers and targeted support for interns, particularly in underserved regions (Evaluation of Garanzia Giovani Programs).

### Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Quality assurance in Italy's VET internships reflects the decentralized nature of its governance. In regions like Veneto and Emilia-Romagna, advanced monitoring systems ensure that internships align with VET curricula and meet industry standards employing tools such as employer feedback and compliance audits to ensure that internships deliver meaningful learning experiences (Lombardy Region Internship Monitoring System). Despite these regional successes, the absence of standardized national criteria for quality assurance creates inconsistencies. In southern regions, resource constraints hinder the development of robust monitoring frameworks, resulting in a lack of oversight and accountability (OECD). This disparity undermines the overall effectiveness of internships, particularly in addressing the needs of students from economically disadvantaged areas.

### Industry Collaboration and Sectoral Alignment

Collaboration between VET providers and industry is pivotal for ensuring that internships align with labor market demands. Northern regions, such as Lombardy, have established strong partnerships with industries in sectors like automotive manufacturing and technology and these collaborations not only enhance the relevance of VET internships but also foster innovation in program design (Italian Ministry of Education). However, such partnerships are less developed in southern Italy, where economic challenges limit industry engagement in VET programs. Initiatives like Garanzia Giovani have sought to address this gap by incentivizing employers to participate in internship schemes, but their impact has been uneven (Evaluation of Garanzia Giovani Programs). This imbalance highlights the need for targeted interventions to promote equitable access to industry-aligned internships across all regions.

### Challenges in the Italian VET Internship System

The Italian VET internship system faces several challenges that affect its effectiveness and inclusivity. One major issue is the variability in implementation due to regional governance. While regions like Emilia-Romagna excel in integrating internships with local economic priorities, southern regions often struggle with limited opportunities and weaker mentorship structures (Regional Development Reports). Financial barriers further compound these challenges. Many internships, particularly extracurricular ones, offer low or no compensation, making them inaccessible to students from disadvantaged

backgrounds (European Commission). This issue is exacerbated by the misuse of internships as substitutes for regular employment, which undermines their educational value and perpetuates precarious work conditions (ANPAL). The quality of supervision and mentorship in VET internships is also inconsistent. Inadequate training for supervisors and a lack of structured mentorship plans limit the developmental potential of internships, reducing their overall impact on students' employability (Reports on Supervision Quality in Italian Internships).

## IRELAND

In Ireland, internship programs are crucial in providing students and graduates with valuable work experience and skills development opportunities. These programs are typically structured work experiences designed to enhance participants' professional capabilities under the guidance of experienced professionals. Quality traineeships are essential for young individuals to gain practical work experience, acquire new skills, and improve their chances of securing quality employment. To ensure effective internships, standardizing best practices is crucial. Research underscores the positive relationship between internships and future job prospects, emphasizing the need for high-quality internship programs. In Ireland, internship programs are shaped by a comprehensive set of national guidelines, policies, and legal frameworks aimed at ensuring quality and compliance.

Key aspects include:

**Higher Education Authority (HEA) Standards and Employment Regulations:** The HEA plays a pivotal role in setting standards for internship programs within higher education institutions. These standards focus on aligning internships with educational objectives and ensuring meaningful learning experiences. Internship programs in Ireland are subject to stringent employment laws and regulations, covering aspects such as minimum wage, working hours, and workplace safety to safeguard the rights of interns.

**Quality Assurance:** Robust quality assurance frameworks are in place to monitor and evaluate internship programs, emphasizing the importance of providing valuable professional development opportunities.

### Industry Collaboration and Sectoral Alignment

Collaboration between vocational education and training (VET) providers and the business community is essential for delivering high-quality internship opportunities. These partnerships integrate internships into curriculum frameworks, ensuring they meet industry needs and provide valuable practical experiences for students. **Role of Public Employment Agencies:** Public employment agencies play a crucial role in matching interns with suitable organizations and supporting successful placements. They employ effective strategies to navigate challenges and ensure a positive internship experience for participants.

### Challenges in the Ireland VET Internship System

Internship programs in Ireland face various challenges, including recruitment difficulties, training effectiveness, supervision quality, evaluation processes, and fair compensation. Best practices emphasize structured training, ongoing mentorship, and clear evaluation

criteria to enhance the quality and effectiveness of internship programs.

Visa Requirements and National Internship Scheme: Guidelines also address visa requirements for international students participating in internship programs in Ireland, ensuring compliance with immigration regulations. Government-led initiatives like the National Internship Scheme provide additional support and guidelines for internship programs targeted at addressing youth unemployment. Collaboration between vocational education providers and businesses is crucial for integrating internships into curriculum frameworks and meeting industry needs. Public employment agencies are key in matching interns with suitable organizations and supporting successful placements. Challenges in internship programs include recruitment, training, supervision, evaluation, and compensation, with best practices focusing on structured training, mentorship, and clear evaluation criteria. Understanding and adhering to these national guidelines, policies, and legal frameworks are imperative for designing and implementing effective internship programs that benefit both interns and host organizations in Ireland. The internship programs in Ireland are governed by robust guidelines and policies that ensure quality and fairness for all stakeholders involved. The positive impact of these programs on participants' employability underscores their importance within the educational and professional landscape.

### Comparative insights in the VET Sector: Italy, Malta, and Ireland

The vocational education and training (VET) sector plays an essential role in equipping students with practical skills and preparing them for the workforce through internships that link education with industry needs. Examining the VET systems in Italy, Malta, and Ireland reveals diverse approaches, strengths, and areas for improvement in enhancing the quality and relevance of internships.

In *Italy*, internships are shaped by a mix of national and regional legislation. Curricular internships integrated into VET programs aim to ensure students gain practical skills that match local industry needs. The regional governance model allows flexibility to address specific economic priorities, as seen in sectors like manufacturing and agriculture in regions such as Emilia-Romagna. However, this approach also leads to inconsistencies, with some regions offering more robust frameworks than others. *Malta's* centralized system ensures a uniform standard for VET internships, guided by the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) and aligned with EU standards such as EQAVET. Programs like the Work-Based Learning Scheme integrate internships directly into curricula, providing hands-on training linked to educational objectives. Despite this, the small scale of Malta's economy restricts opportunities in emerging fields like green technology and advanced manufacturing. In *Ireland*, comprehensive national frameworks emphasize structured and outcome-oriented internships. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) ensures alignment between vocational curricula and practical training, supported through public employment agencies which facilitate placements across diverse sectors, including construction, healthcare, and technology, while also targeting marginalized groups to increase accessibility. However, high compliance demands pose challenges for smaller organizations, particularly in rural areas.

Quality assurance in VET internships also reflects differing priorities and strategies across the three countries. Italy relies on regional monitoring systems to oversee internship quality, with regions like Lombardy employing rigorous standards. However, the absence of unified national criteria creates gaps in quality assurance, especially in less resource-rich regions. Malta uses a centralized oversight model managed by the

National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE), ensuring alignment between internships and curriculum goals through accreditation processes. Challenges persist in achieving consistent mentorship and feedback across all placements. Ireland applies robust quality assurance mechanisms through HEA standards, including continuous evaluation based on feedback from employers and students. This rigorous approach ensures high-quality internships but presents challenges for smaller businesses due to resource-intensive requirements.

Industry collaboration is a cornerstone of effective VET internships, fostering alignment between educational programs and labor market needs. In Italy, partnerships between vocational programs and industries occur at both national and regional levels, with efforts to tailor internships to local economic priorities. However, significant variability in engagement exists, with less developed regions struggling to establish meaningful employer connections. Malta's small size facilitates strong collaboration with industries such as tourism, hospitality, and financial services, ensuring internships align with economic priorities. However, the focus on a limited range of sectors restricts opportunities in emerging fields critical for future growth. Ireland's collaboration with industries benefits from structured involvement through public employment agencies, offering diverse opportunities in sectors like technology and healthcare. Despite this, rural areas face challenges in replicating the same level of collaboration seen in urban centers.

Each country faces challenges rooted in its unique socio-economic context. Italy contends with fragmentation in regional governance, resulting in disparities in internship quality and access. Financial barriers, such as unpaid or underpaid internships, further hinder participation, especially for disadvantaged students. There is also an ongoing risk of internships being misused as substitutes for regular employment. Malta's challenges stem from its economic limitations, with over-reliance on dominant sectors like tourism and hospitality. The lack of internships in future-oriented industries such as renewable energy and inconsistent mentorship quality diminishes the overall experience. In Ireland, while internships are generally high in quality, regulatory demands can deter smaller businesses, limiting opportunities in underserved or rural regions. Expanding internships in cutting-edge fields like green technology and digital innovation remains an area for growth. While each country demonstrates unique strategies for managing internships, opportunities exist for shared learning and collaboration to address gaps, enhance quality, and align internships more closely with the evolving demands of the labor market.

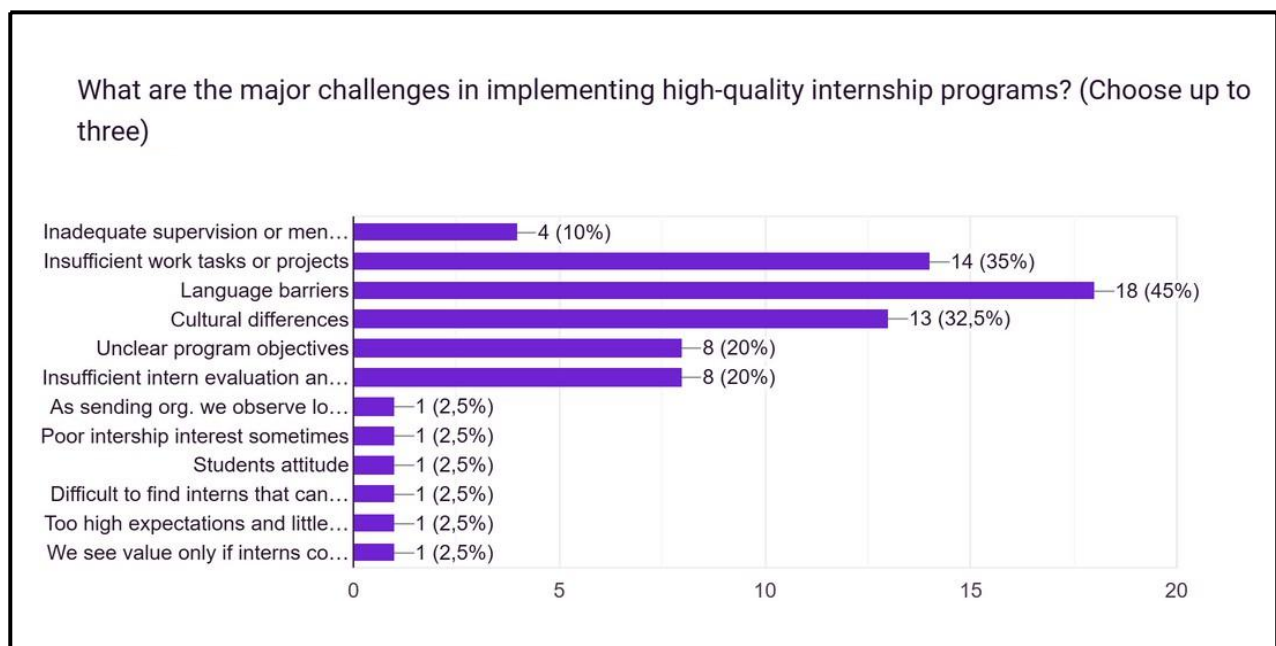
## **Key Insights: needs and challenges revealed through research field work**

The surveys conducted among organizations participating in Erasmus internship programs in three partner countries of the project: Malta, Italy and Ireland mixed with other research instruments such as focus group discussions and interviews, provide valuable insights into areas that require attention and the challenges these organizations face in managing internships effectively. One of the most significant findings from these surveys is the widespread recognition of the need to optimize the candidate selection process. Organizations frequently express a desire to better align the skills and qualifications of interns with the specific needs and expectations of host organizations. This alignment is viewed as a critical factor in ensuring that internship experiences are more productive and beneficial for both the interns and the hosting entities. The absence of a well-matched selection process often results in inefficiencies and missed opportunities for meaningful professional development. Another key area identified through the surveys is the necessity of increased financial support within the Erasmus internship framework. Financial limitations are highlighted as a significant barrier, particularly for enabling the participation of interns from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Organizations emphasize that without adequate funding, it becomes challenging to create equitable access to internship opportunities. Additionally, host organizations often face constraints in delivering high-quality training experiences due to budgetary pressures. Greater financial support would not only expand accessibility but also enable hosting entities to invest more in the resources and mentoring required to ensure enriching and effective internships. The surveys also underline the importance of enhancing communication among the various stakeholders involved in internship programs. Many organizations note that clearer and more effective communication between sending institutions, host organizations, and interns could prevent misunderstandings and misaligned expectations. Improved communication mechanisms would enable stakeholders to address issues in a timely and collaborative manner, thereby reducing conflicts and fostering smoother program implementation. The lack of such streamlined communication is seen as a recurring issue that hampers the overall effectiveness of Erasmus internships. The main challenges reported by organizations provide further context to these findings. Language barriers are frequently cited as a common difficulty, as they can compromise both the quality of communication and the successful integration of interns into their workplace environments. These barriers often lead to misunderstandings and limit interns' ability to fully engage with their roles. Cultural differences are also highlighted as a significant challenge, with organizations noting that these can complicate adaptation processes and create friction in collaboration.

Additionally, some organizations report a lack of well-defined projects or tasks for interns, which can significantly reduce the educational and professional value of the experience. Interns who encounter vague or poorly structured assignments often feel unengaged, and the organizations themselves miss the opportunity to maximize the benefits of hosting talented individuals. These findings collectively suggest that while Erasmus internship programs have already achieved considerable success in fostering cross-cultural exchange and professional growth, there remain critical areas for improvement. Optimizing the candidate selection process to better match skills with organizational needs would enhance the productivity and relevance of internships. Increasing financial support would address existing inequalities and empower host organizations to deliver higher-quality experiences. Strengthening communication between all stakeholders would resolve many of the

misunderstandings and conflicts that currently arise. Finally, addressing common challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and the lack of structured tasks would ensure that internships provide maximum value to all participants. Taken together, these measures would significantly enhance the impact and effectiveness of Erasmus internships, making them more rewarding for interns and beneficial for host organizations.

Responses, both closed and open-ended, provide crucial insights into organizational experiences and practical suggestions for addressing recurring issues. Open-ended responses, in particular, reveal nuanced perspectives that illuminate the specific, day-to-day difficulties faced during the management of internships. The responses to the survey (*Figure 1*) question regarding the challenges in implementing high-quality internship programs revealed several recurring themes. Language barriers emerged as the most frequently mentioned challenge (45% of the responders), cited by respondents as a significant obstacle to effective communication and integration of interns. This issue is particularly prevalent in organizations engaging with international interns or those operating in multilingual environments. Respondents emphasized the difficulties in ensuring mutual understanding and facilitating day-to-day interactions, which can hinder both intern productivity and satisfaction.



A substantial proportion of respondents (35%) reported challenges in providing sufficient or meaningful work tasks for interns. This lack of structured activities limits the practical learning opportunities available to interns and can reduce the perceived value of internship programs. The responses indicate a need for more deliberate planning and alignment of internship roles with organizational objectives to create impactful and engaging experiences. Furthermore, cultural differences were highlighted (32.5% of responders) as a recurring challenge, particularly in organizations hosting interns from diverse backgrounds. Variances in work styles, communication norms, and expectations were cited as sources of friction that can affect the overall success of internship programs. Respondents suggested that these differences often lead to

misunderstandings and misalignments, making it essential for organizations to implement strategies that foster cultural awareness and inclusivity.

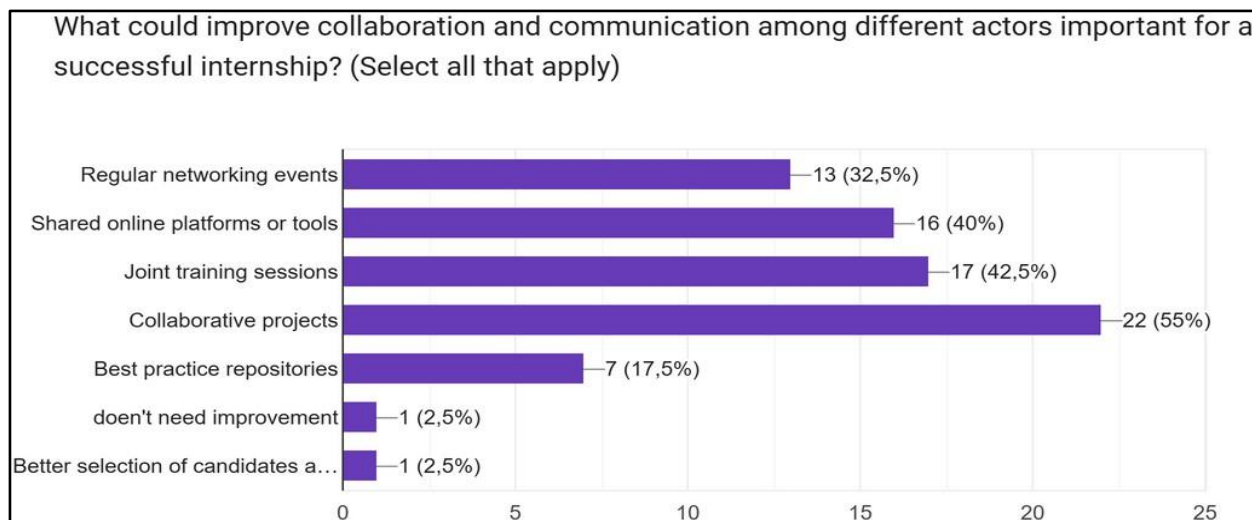
Several respondents emphasized the absence of structured evaluation and feedback mechanisms as a critical barrier to effective internship programs. Without these systems, organizations face challenges in providing constructive guidance to interns and evaluating the overall success of their programs. The lack of regular feedback hinders the professional development of interns and limits opportunities for program improvement based on measurable outcomes. Similarly, unclear or undefined program objectives were frequently cited as a significant impediment, leading to a lack of focus in internship activities and misaligned expectations between interns and organizations. The importance of clearly communicated objectives was stressed as a means to ensure coherence and alignment among stakeholders. Another notable challenge was inadequate supervision or mentorship, where the absence of dedicated personnel to guide interns detracts from the quality of their experiences and compromises the program's effectiveness. Effective mentorship is vital for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, underscoring the need for organizations to invest in resources that support intern development. Additionally, less commonly reported but still significant issues included difficulties in recruiting long-term interns, disparities between intern expectations and organizational offerings, limited support from sending organizations, and unrealistic performance expectations from interns, reflecting the complexity of managing high-quality internship programs and highlight areas for strategic improvement.

Many organizations also express a desire for greater support in preparing interns for their roles. Open-ended responses frequently mention the importance of implementing more detailed pre-internship evaluations, such as interviews focused on assessing soft skills like teamwork and adaptability. Some respondents propose introducing preliminary evaluation tools to better gauge interns' readiness and expectations before their integration into the workplace. One respondent suggests: "A more detailed pre-internship assessment would allow us to identify candidates with the right skillset and avoid potential mismatches."

Another area of concern highlighted by 20% of respondents relates to financial support. Adequate funding and budget estimation/management is deemed essential to ensure that interns can manage associated costs and that host organizations can provide high-quality training experiences. Organizations often find existing budgets insufficient, particularly when accommodating international interns who may require additional assistance with housing and transportation. Open-ended responses suggest increasing Erasmus program funding to alleviate these challenges. A participant states, "The real cost of hosting an intern includes not only training but also logistical and supervisory expenses, which current funding levels fail to fully address."

The need for improved communication among stakeholders emerges as another critical area, cited by 15% of organizations. Respondents indicate that consistent and structured communication between sending entities, host organizations, and interns would minimize misunderstandings and misaligned expectations. Suggestions from open-ended responses include the development of shared communication platforms or regular update sessions to monitor interns' progress. One participant proposes: "A digital platform for shared updates and feedback would streamline coordination and ensure better alignment of goals."

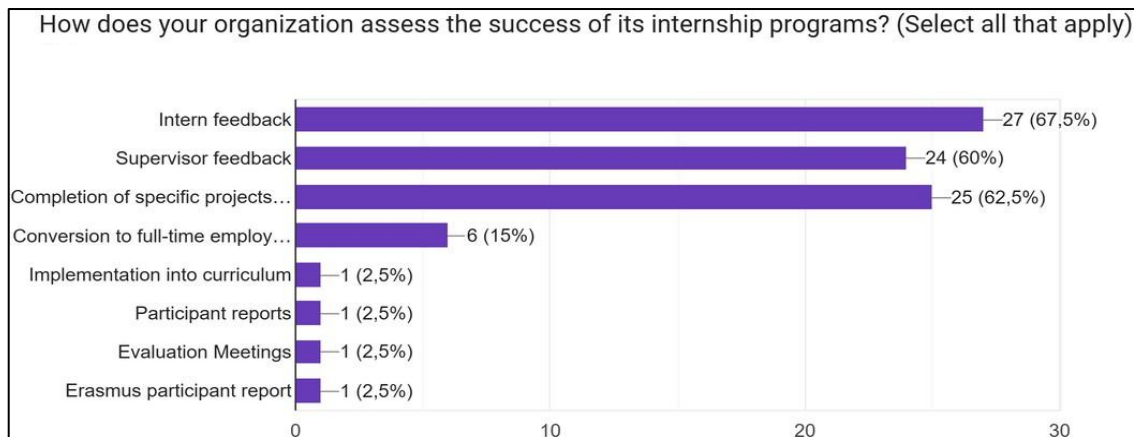




A less frequently mentioned but still notable concern involves the lack of structured tasks or projects for interns, identified by around 7% of organizations. Smaller organizations, in particular, report challenges in designing comprehensive work plans due to limited resources. Respondents emphasize the value of detailed guidelines from Erasmus+ on structuring internship experiences to ensure that interns acquire practical, applicable skills. Among the open-ended suggestions is the creation of a "project manual" featuring examples of effective tasks for different organizational contexts, which could help standardize the internship experience.

The analysis of how organizations assess the success of their internship programs provides valuable insights into the evaluation methods employed and highlights areas for potential improvement. Intern feedback emerged as the most frequently used method, underscoring the importance organizations place on understanding the intern's perspective. Alongside this, supervisor feedback was also widely cited, indicating that many organizations rely on qualitative input from both interns and their immediate supervisors. These findings suggest that feedback mechanisms are central to the evaluation process, but they may lack standardization or structured implementation.





Another significant method of assessment is the completion of specific projects or tasks, which reflects a focus on tangible outcomes as a measure of success. This highlights the value organizations place on internships that result in concrete deliverables, reinforcing the need for programs to be designed with clear objectives and meaningful tasks. However, the relatively low emphasis on metrics such as conversion to full-time employment suggests that many organizations do not view internships as a direct pathway to talent acquisition or lack the tools to monitor long-term outcomes. This could represent a missed opportunity to evaluate the broader impact of internships on organizational goals.

Formalized evaluation processes, such as participant reports or Erasmus participant documentation, are rarely used. This indicates that many organizations do not prioritize structured, standardized evaluation methods, which could limit their ability to systematically analyze program effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. Additionally, methods such as integrating internship outcomes into broader curricula or institutional frameworks are scarcely mentioned, revealing a gap in leveraging internships as a tool for organizational learning and development.

These findings suggest several avenues for improvement. Organizations could enhance their evaluation frameworks by adopting more structured feedback mechanisms and integrating long-term metrics such as career progression or employment outcomes. Formalized reporting and regular assessment meetings would provide a systematic approach to capturing data and deriving actionable insights. Furthermore, aligning internship programs with strategic goals and educational frameworks would enable organizations to better evaluate their impact and ensure that they contribute meaningfully to both intern development and organizational objectives.

partner countries and their responses reveals not only the strengths of the internship programs but also critical areas that require strategic improvements to maximize their impact.

The majority of participants (65%) fell into the 18-24 age group, reflecting a strong alignment of internships with early-career individuals, particularly students and recent graduates seeking practical experience to supplement their academic learning. Another 25% of respondents were aged between 25 and 30, indicating that internships also attract professionals transitioning into new fields or seeking to enhance specific skill sets. The smallest proportion, 10%, were between 31 and 35, suggesting that internships have less traction among mid-career professionals. This demographic distribution highlights the need for internship programs to primarily focus on the needs and expectations of younger participants, while also exploring ways to make these programs appealing and accessible to older demographics. As regards the internship duration, it varied considerably, with 40% of participants completing internships lasting 1-3 months and 35% reporting durations of 4-6 months. Internships exceeding six months were reported by 25% of respondents, indicating a smaller, but significant, commitment to long-term placements. These findings reflect the dual focus of internships: shorter programs typically emphasize initial exposure and networking, while longer placements allow for deeper immersion, skill development, and meaningful contributions to projects.

The survey responses indicated a broad range of organizational types hosting interns. Private companies accounted for the largest share at 45%, followed by NGOs (30%), educational institutions (15%), and public sector entities (10%). Geographically, internships were concentrated in a few key locations, with Italy hosting 35% of respondents, followed by Portugal (20%), Slovenia (15%), and smaller distributions in other countries. This geographic dispersion points to the international dimension of internship programs, where interns often gain exposure to different work environments, cultures, and practices. However, the data also suggest potential logistical and cultural challenges associated with international placements, such as language barriers and cultural adaptation, which may require targeted support mechanisms.

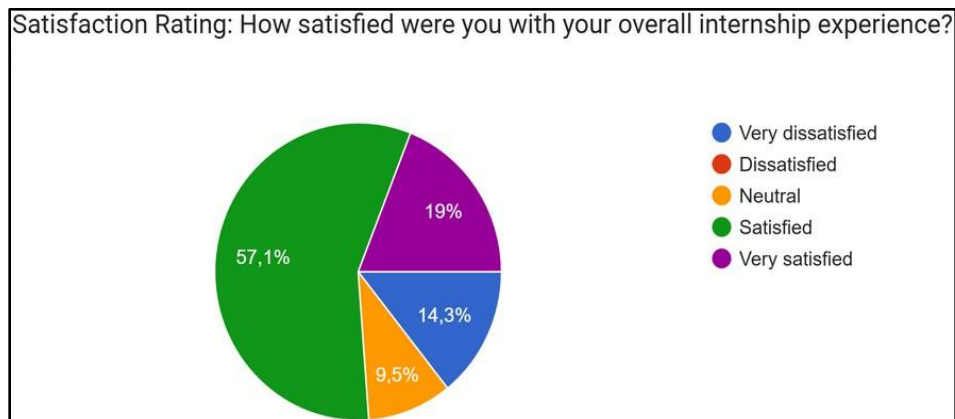
### *Roles and responsibilities during internships*

Respondents held a variety of roles during their internships, reflecting the breadth of opportunities available. Approximately 25% worked as project management assistants, often tasked with supporting administrative and operational aspects of projects. Another 20% reported roles in healthcare-related fields, emphasizing the importance of internships in sectors critical to societal well-being. Education-focused roles, such as teaching assistants or educators, made up 15%, while 40% of participants occupied diverse positions in architecture, engineering, and other professional domains. These roles highlight the adaptability of internship programs in catering to sector-specific requirements, while also pointing to the need for tailored training to prepare interns for the unique challenges of their roles.

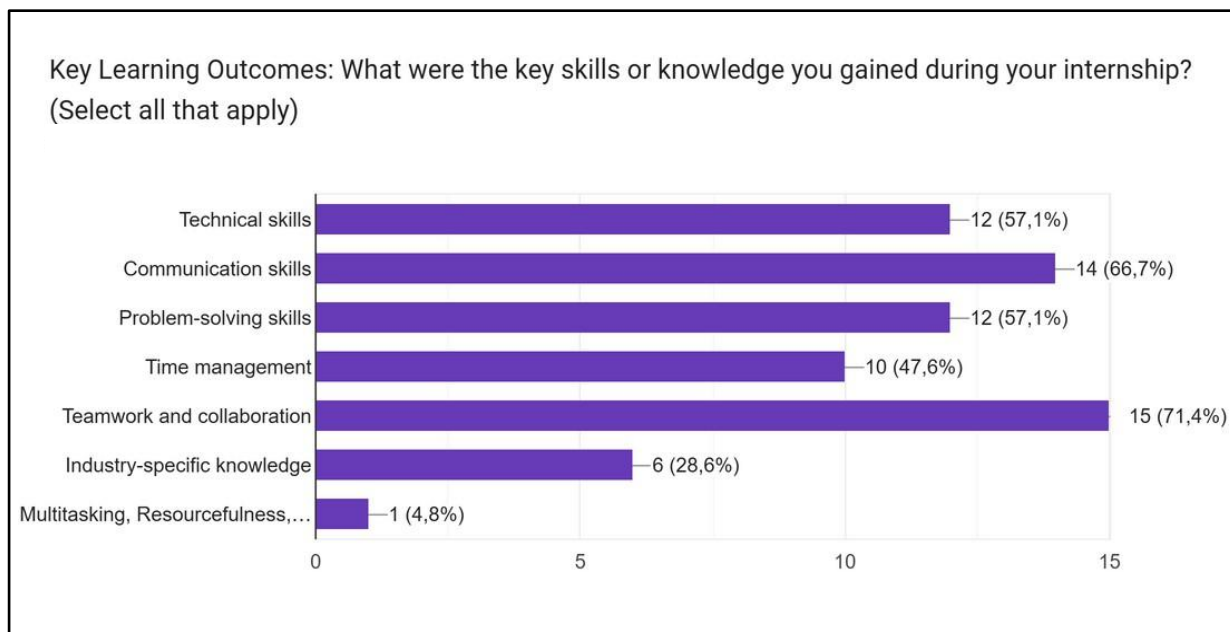
### *Participant satisfaction and key learning outcomes*

Intern satisfaction levels provide a critical indicator of program effectiveness. The survey revealed that 57.1% of participants were satisfied with their internships, while 9.5% expressed neutrality, and 14.3% reported high level of dissatisfaction. This distribution suggests that while

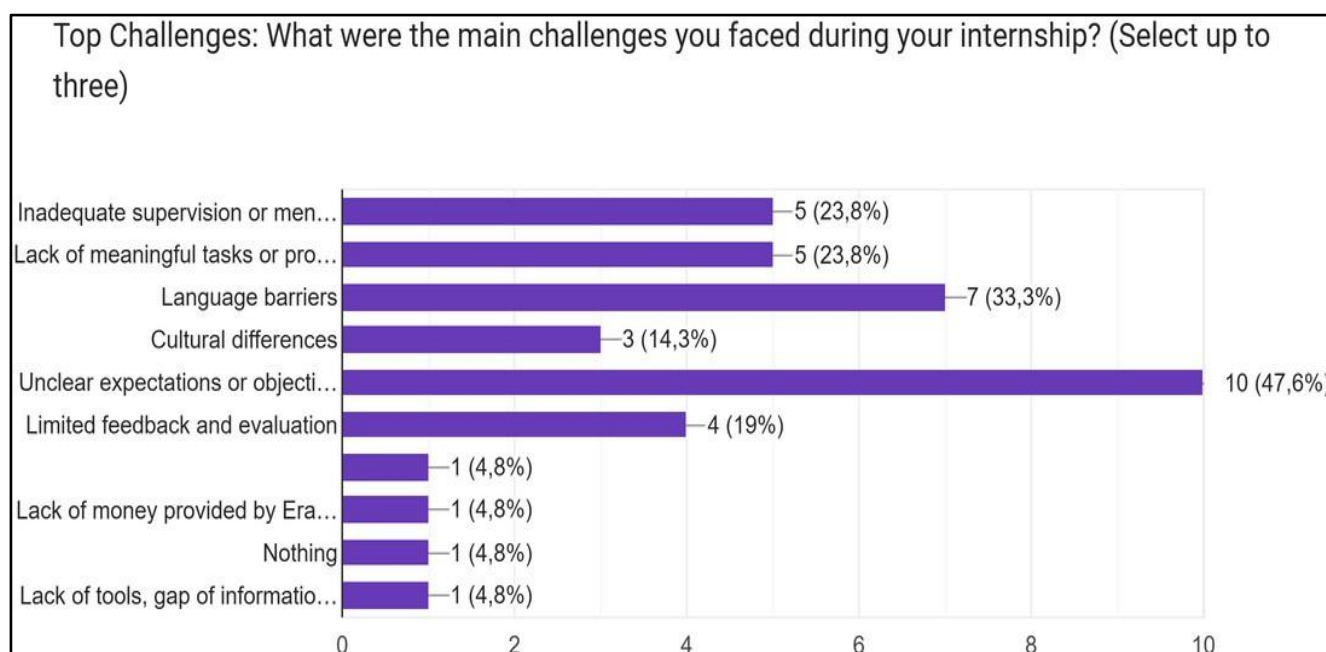
a majority find internships beneficial, a significant portion experience unmet expectations, warranting closer examination of factors such as task design, supervision, and organizational culture.



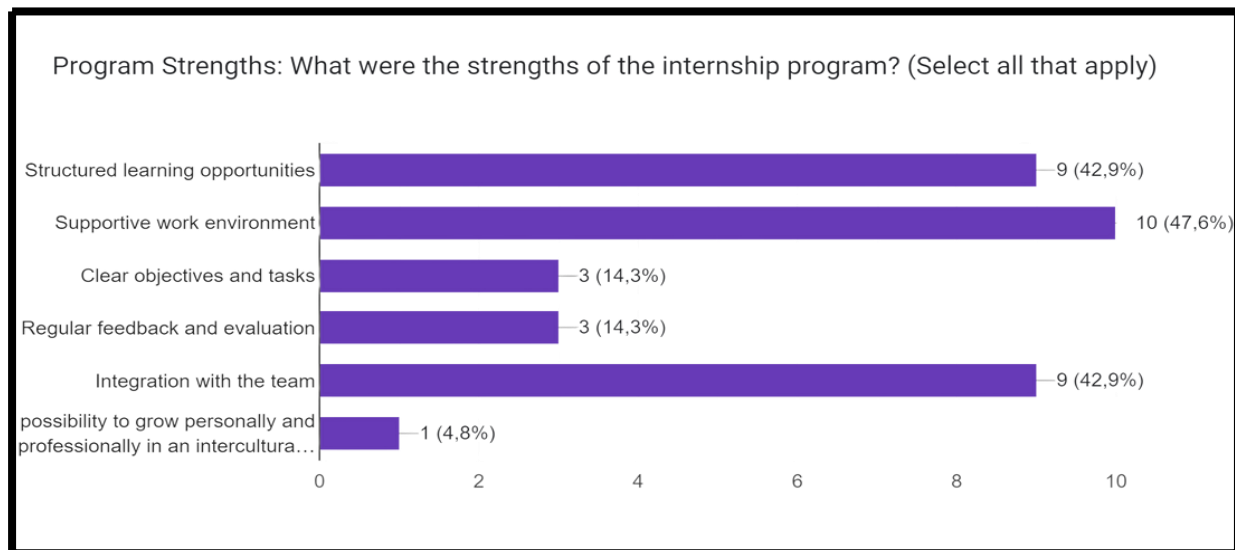
When asked about learning outcomes, 57.1% of respondents identified technical skills as a key benefit, underscoring the role of internships in bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical application. Communication skills were noted by 66.7%, followed by problem-solving abilities at 57.1%, and teamwork and collaboration at 71.4%. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of internship learning, encompassing both hard and soft skills essential for career advancement.



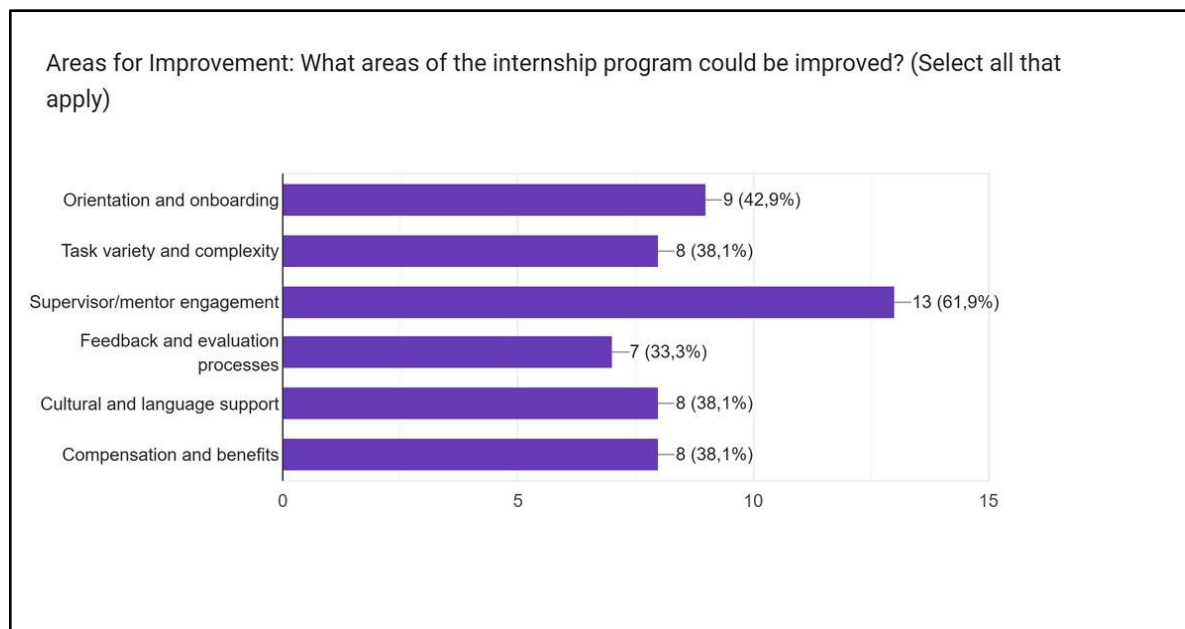
Participants reported several challenges during their internships, with 47.6% citing unclear expectations or objectives as a primary issue. This ambiguity can lead to frustration and a sense of underutilization among interns, emphasizing the importance of setting clear, well-communicated goals. Another 23.8% mentioned a lack of meaningful tasks, which can diminish the perceived value of the internship and hinder skill acquisition. Inadequate supervision was reported by 23.8% of respondents, pointing to gaps in mentorship and guidance that are crucial for a positive learning experience. While 14.3% and 33.3% respectively cited cultural or language barriers, these challenges can significantly impact the experiences of international interns.



Internship programs were praised for several strengths, including structured learning opportunities (42.9%), supportive work environments (47.6%) and integration with the team (42.9%). These elements contribute significantly to the perceived value of internships and should be retained and expanded upon.

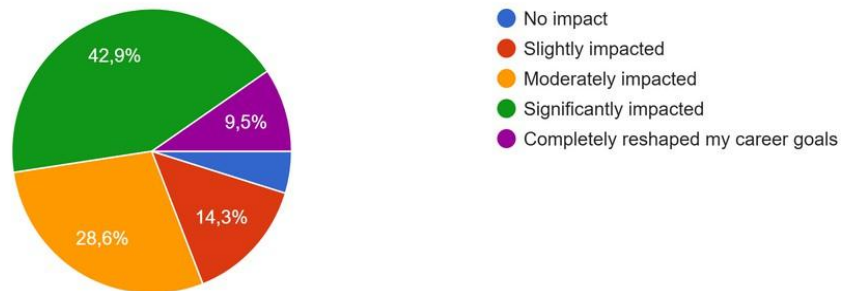


However, participants also highlighted areas for improvement. Task variety and complexity were identified as needing attention by 38.1% of respondents, reflecting a need for more engaging and challenging assignments. Supervisor engagement was cited by 61.9% as insufficient, suggesting the need for better mentoring practices. Feedback processes, mentioned by 33.3%, also require enhancement to provide interns with actionable insights into their performance.



While 61.9% of respondents felt adequately supported during their internships, 38.1% indicated the need for additional training or resources to perform their tasks effectively. Suggestions included more practical courses, better orientation sessions, and access to industry-specific tools. The career impact of internships was somehow positive, with 9.5% of respondents reporting that their experience significantly or moderately influenced their career goals, 28.6% of responders that declare that the internship has moderately impacted their internship and 42.9% that have had a significant impact. This underscores the role of internships as a critical stepping stone in professional development, offering opportunities for exploration, skill enhancement, and networking.

Career Impact: How has this internship impacted your career goals or plans?



## Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings from this need assessment highlight the multifaceted challenges and opportunities associated with internship programs across Malta, Italy, and Ireland. These programs are vital in bridging the gap between education and employment, offering practical experience and professional development to young people while providing organizations with access to fresh talent. However, the analysis reveals that several systemic issues hinder the full potential of these initiatives, necessitating targeted interventions to ensure they are effective, equitable, and sustainable.

A recurring challenge identified in the data is the lack of clarity and structure in internship programs. Many respondents pointed to undefined objectives, insufficient mentorship, and poorly structured tasks as barriers to success. Programs without clear goals or alignment between organizational needs and intern expectations risk being ineffective for both parties. Establishing measurable objectives and transparent communication about the program's purpose is essential for ensuring that internships are both meaningful and impactful.

The selection process emerged as a critical area requiring improvement. Organizations expressed concerns about the difficulty in aligning intern skills with program demands, often resulting in mismatches that reduce the effectiveness of the experience. To address this, the selection process must incorporate robust criteria that assess both technical and soft skills. Pre-internship interviews, competency-based evaluations, and preliminary assessments can help identify candidates whose profiles align closely with the program's objectives.

Preparation processes for internships were also highlighted as needing enhancement. Interns often enter programs without adequate orientation, leading to confusion and inefficiencies. A structured preparation phase, including comprehensive orientation sessions, skills workshops, and an introduction to organizational culture, can equip interns to contribute effectively from the outset. Similarly, cross-cultural and language training is vital for programs involving international placements, helping interns adapt to diverse environments and navigate potential communication barriers.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential for assessing both intern performance and program success, yet these were often reported as lacking or inconsistently applied. Regular progress reviews, feedback sessions, and the use of standardized evaluation tools can provide actionable insights for improvement. Feedback loops involving both interns and supervisors ensure that programs remain dynamic and responsive to emerging needs. Additionally, incorporating longitudinal tracking to assess the long-term career impact of internships would provide valuable data to inform program design.

Financial support represents another critical dimension of internship programs, especially in international contexts. Many interns reported challenges in covering basic expenses such as accommodation, transportation, and daily living costs. Organizations, particularly smaller ones, also noted the financial strain of hosting interns. Expanding stipends or financial assistance for interns, along with subsidies or grants for host organizations, can alleviate these pressures. Enhanced financial support not only ensures inclusivity, particularly for participants from disadvantaged backgrounds, but also enables organizations to maintain high-quality internship offerings.

The selection of tasks and projects assigned to interns was another frequently mentioned concern. Interns often reported engaging in activities that were either too simplistic or

unrelated to their professional aspirations. To maximize the value of internships, host organizations should design roles that are challenging yet achievable, allowing interns to apply their skills in meaningful ways. Offering project-based opportunities that align with the organization's strategic goals can create a mutually beneficial dynamic, ensuring that both parties derive tangible outcomes.

Finally, collaboration and networking among stakeholders play a crucial role in the success of internship programs. Strengthening partnerships between educational institutions, public agencies, and host organizations can create more integrated pathways for students transitioning into the workforce. Establishing networks to share best practices, as well as developing standardized frameworks for internship design and delivery, can enhance consistency and quality across programs.



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