

MY INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE: A STEP TO A “CUSTOM-TAILORED” INTERNSHIP

I enrolled the Master Program in East European Studies in autumn, 2008. The *Institute for East European Studies (OEI)* has been my academic home since. During the first year of studies I was surfing the Internet for posted internship opportunities, while catching hold of new coursework dynamics and related assignments. After some time of futile internship profile matching, I decided on a more fruitful tactics: advertise myself as an intern. This is how I made the first step that took me to a rewarding position as an intern and part of the team in the Regional Project Office of the Swiss Cultural Program for the Western Balkans in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The internship for the SCP Regional Office was not my first one. Previous working experiences entailed internships for international organizations (Council of Europe), national authorities (Ministry of Culture of R. Macedonia) and diplomatic missions (Macedonian Embassy to Germany), local NGOs (Youth Educational Forum), as well as international ones (Open Society Institute – New York). In most of the cases agencies advertised internship posts to fill in a need or a resource gap in their planned activities. Hence, accepted interns eventually end up developing their working experience in a way that is strictly streamlined by the needs of others. By so doing, interns eventually suppress personal views and projections that might enliven and bring a new dynamics to the confluence of ideas with the interning partner. Thus, the interns frequently conclude an internship with convoluted impressions about their role, contribution, and even question achievements of the interned period. These common experiences interns make, including myself, conflicted greatly with my ideas on what an internship should entail: a two-way fruitful exchange between the parties involved. For this reason, I decided to change my tactics when looking for an internship as part of the requirements to complete the Masters degree in East European studies at the OEI. Hence, I inquired with organizations into opening internship positions that I could fill.

When I started the quest for internships I became aware of a misbalance in my academic and practical experience. Therefore, an internship for me had the purpose of translating academic knowledge into culture-related projects. Since I was interested in South-East Europe I browsed organizations that implement projects with cultural dimension in the region and detected three potential organizations. The first on the list

was the Regional Office of the Swiss Cultural Program for the Western Balkans. They offered no internship posts. However, after my initial contact with them in January 2010, things developed well. Two elements were crucial for the successful turn out of events. First, I took up an initiative and contacted them by email. In the email I briefly described my academic qualifications, concisely summarized the past experiences, and clearly outlined personal expectations from the internship. As second, I attached to it a letter of motivation and a CV as supporting documents. The Letter of Motivation and the *Curriculum Vitae* presented me in greater detail. A period of deliberation followed in which the organization and myself agreed on the content of the internship and negotiated a small, yet significant remuneration. I started my internship 7-8 months after the initial contact.

Within the two months as an intern I was involved in the daily management of the Program Actions of the Program by screening, re-assessing and analyzing incoming project proposals, and analyzing developed project strategies. Further, I contributed to the communications development of the Program. At the same time, I was involved in the management development, including brainstorming sessions on developing indicators of impact of the Program. Last but not least, I performed a mapping exercise of cultural advocacy initiatives and lobbying in response to ensuring sustainability of the SCP initiative in the Western Balkans. All activities had been discussed in detail prior to my arrival and modified or extended in consultation with the supervisor, the Deputy Regional Manager, and the Regional Manager of the SCP. Although only eight weeks long, the internship proved to be a valuable and beneficial exercise for both myself as an intern, and the office as the contractor.

To sum up, a search for an internship position from the pool of offered ones often misses the purpose of an interning exercise. Instead of a two-way exchange, interns are often faced with a role of executors or gap-fillers without developing or discussing personal ideas and expectations. In order to save time in the quest for a desired internship while adapting to coursework dynamics and workload, I would recommend potential interns to take initiative and change tactics. Accordingly, instead of fishing out an internship from a pool of marketed ones, I would recommend potential interns to narrow down their quest by understanding where their personal needs and interest lie and modify or negotiate those when they approach organizations for internships. The result, a custom-tailored internship, will be of greater mutual benefit to the parties involved.