

**Share-Net**  
The Netherlands

# Successful Student-NGO Collaborations

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Working Group "Linking Research, Policy and Practice"

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## 1. Introduction

This is a practical guide for successful student-NGO collaborations.<sup>1,2</sup> Every student-NGO collaboration is different because:

- 1) Students come from different educational programmes with different **end terms, interests** and **timing**;
- 2) The **purpose** of the collaboration may differ. For instance, NGOs may create internship vacancies based on their organisational research needs for which students can apply; the student's research may be part of a bigger research project; or students may come up with a research topic themselves;
- 3) The **number of stakeholders** (Figure 1) may vary. Usually, student-NGO collaborations involve at least three stakeholders: the *student*, the *university/supervisor* and the *NGO*. When the student intends to do fieldwork, the number of stakeholders may increase as *partner NGOs* and the *communities* under study become involved as well.

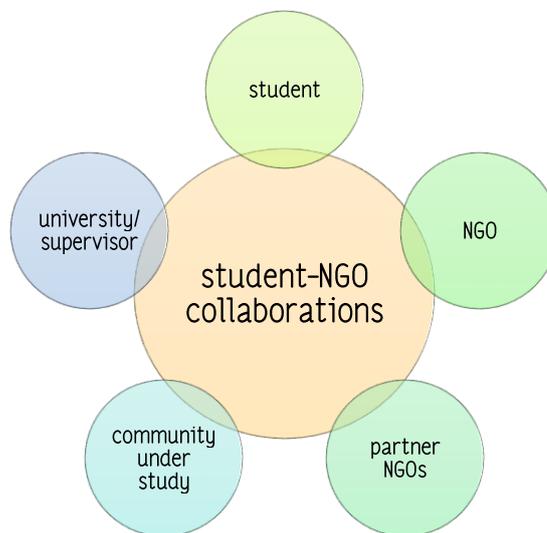


Figure 1 Potential stakeholders in student-NGO collaborations

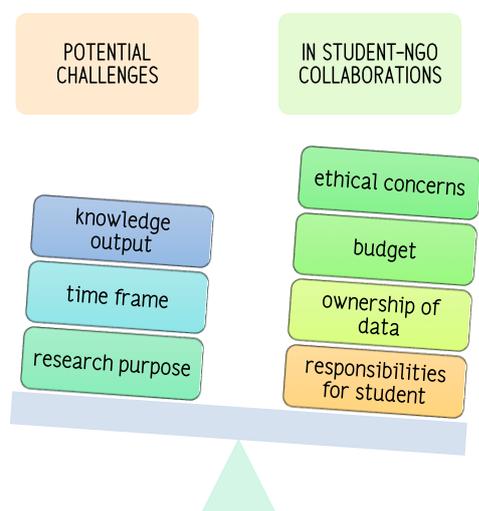


Figure 2 Potential challenges in student-NGO collaborations

Due to the involvement of various stakeholders, student-NGO collaborations may pose various **challenges**, such as:

- Differences between the academic and the NGO way of working, for instance with regard to the *research purpose*, the *time frame* for conducting research, and the required type of *knowledge output*;
- Differences between the university and NGO supervisors in handling *ethical concerns* and *responsibilities*, such as safety concerns for students who do fieldwork abroad;
- Differences about *ownership of data* and intellectual property rights; and
- *Budget* allocations.

<sup>1</sup> This practical guide has been developed based on the outcomes of the Share-Net Netherlands round table “Promising Practices: Linking students and NGOs”, which was organised in November 2015 to discuss promising practices of student-NGO collaborations, including their challenges and lessons learned. For the report and promising practices see <http://share-netinternational.org/report-share-net-round-table-promising-practices-linking-students-and-ngos/>

<sup>2</sup> This round table was organised by the Share-Net Netherlands working group “Linking research, policy and practice” in order to stimulate (1) research-informed policy and practice, (2) research relevant for policy and practice, and (3) students to develop critical policy and practice perspectives.

When such challenges arise, there is the pitfall of **students feeling caught in between** the expectations and requirements of the stakeholders involved because they feel that they need to balance those various expectations.

To encourage beneficial collaborations for *all stakeholders* involved, this practical guide proposes a set of guidelines that can be used by NGOs and universities to streamline their communication by making mutual assumptions, expectations and challenges explicit at the start of a new collaboration. Because there are many types of student-NGO collaborations, this practical guide does not provide a standardized protocol. Rather, the guide addresses potentially relevant topics and includes references for more information. The stakeholders are recommended to discuss these topics together and to incorporate the outcomes into an agreement at the start of their collaboration (see *Annex 2. Format for drafting an agreement*).

**It is important to have clarity about each other's expectations and to lay these down in an agreement.**

**Tip:** *Many students start developing their research proposals and looking for internships at the start of the academic year (around September). This is usually **the best time** for students, universities and NGOs to approach each other about potential student-NGO collaborations, to take place in the second half of the academic year (February – July).*

## 1. A good beginning makes a good ending

### 1.1. Stakeholders and their assumptions and expectations

A student-NGO collaboration should be a win-win situation for all parties involved and none of them should feel taken advantage of. To achieve this, it is important that the university and NGO make clear agreements about what is expected of the student, for instance in terms of *internship activities* and the *research output*.

A benefit of student-NGO collaborations is that students develop their professional capacities by learning more about the daily affairs of working at an NGO. They may appreciate **internship activities** that allow them to accompany NGO practitioners on their daily activities or to attend departmental meetings. With regard to **research output**, a university supervisor may expect the student to deliver a thesis that meets the university's scientific requirements. At the same time, NGOs may expect a to-the-point report with recommendations for programme improvements. Although each have their own expectations, it is important to be **realistic about what can be expected from the student** within the set time frame (*not making the research output too demanding*). Students need sufficient time to develop their research skills and at the same time have a valuable learning experience at the NGO (*valuable internship activities*).

**Tip:** Discuss beforehand which research output is expected and into what extent the student will be graded for these various outputs, and by whom.

**Tip:** In case supervision of the student changes during the research process, it is useful to use the research proposal written by the student as guidance to avoid suggestions for change from alternating stakeholders during the research process.

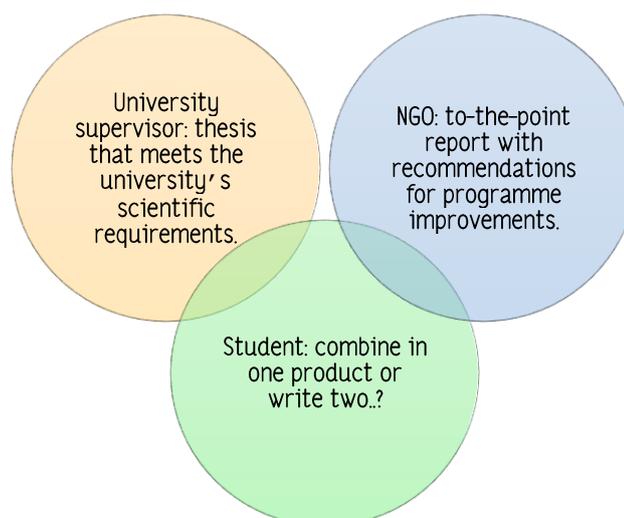


Figure 3 Discuss expectations regarding research output

#### Topics to discuss together at the start of a new collaboration:<sup>3</sup>

- To be answered by each stakeholder:
  - What are my expectations (e.g. this collaboration is a success when...);
  - What are my expectations of the other stakeholders (including the student)?
- Where do your expectations differ? Which of these differences should be addressed before coming to an agreement?
- To inspire this conversation, each stakeholder could first individually complete the Role Perceptions Checklist (see Annex 1. Role perceptions checklist)

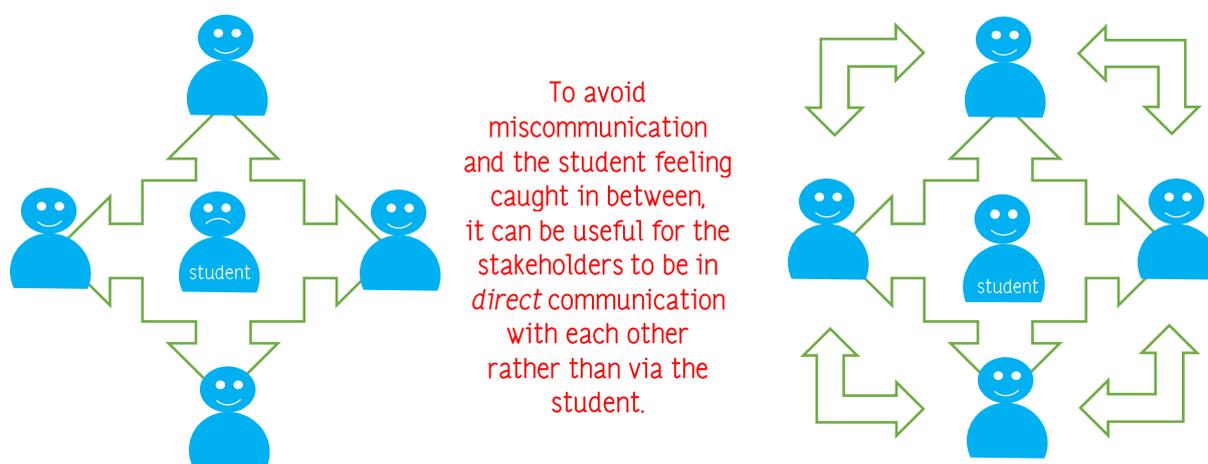
<sup>3</sup> Based on: Edwards, H., Aspland, T., O'Leary, J., Ryan, Y., Southey, G., & Timms, P. (1995). *Tracking postgraduate supervision*. Brisbane: Academic Staff Development Unit.

## 1.2. Regular communication and clear agreements

To encourage successful student-NGO collaborations, it is important that all stakeholders:

- are clear about their *expectations* from the beginning of a collaboration;
- make clear *agreements*, and
- *communicate* on a regular basis and directly with each other, rather than via the student.

**Direct communication** with all stakeholders involved is especially important at the start of the collaboration when the research question(s) are defined. Defining the research question(s) is an important aspect of the student-NGO collaboration because it evaluates the added value of the collaboration for each stakeholder. Further along in the process, there may be less need for direct communication between all stakeholders involved and direct communication could become useful when the study is about to change its focus or when the student has difficulties linking the academic and NGO requirements.



### Topics to discuss together at the start of a new collaboration:

- What are the *requirements and responsibilities* of the stakeholders involved?
- What are important *deadlines*, e.g. for handing in the research proposal and thesis?
- Who is the *approving authority* for the end product(s), including the thesis, and who will *grade or evaluate* these end products?
- Into what extent will the student work *independently*, e.g. in formulating and revising the research questions and design, and in approaching the communities under study?
- Who should *initiate* meetings between the stakeholders?
- *How often*, and *when*, should meetings between the stakeholders be initiated?
- How should potential conflicts or *misunderstandings* between stakeholders be addressed?

### 1.3. Learning: an important objective of the collaboration

A benefit of student-NGO collaborations is not only that NGOs profit from students' skills but also that students develop their professional capacities by learning more about the daily affairs of working at an NGO. Student-NGO collaborations also offer the other stakeholders involved to develop their professional capacities. For instance, supervising a student may enable NGO practitioners to develop their coaching and mentoring skills. It is recommended that each stakeholder formulates their **professional and personal learning goals**<sup>4</sup> at the start of the collaboration. Then, discuss which internship activities could help to achieve those goals (Figure 4)? For the student, such **internship activities** could include:

- accompanying NGO practitioners on their daily activities;
- participating in departmental meetings;
- learning how to work programmatically;
- networking;
- conducting fieldwork or visit partner NGOs to learn about working in other cultures.



Figure 4 Examples of learning goals and related activities

#### Professional and Personal Learning in Internships

In January and September, students start an internship of three to six months at the Oxfam Novib Academy. Each student is assigned a mentor from Oxfam Novib. The Oxfam Novib Academy encourages close collaboration between the mentor and the student's supervisor from the university. Before the internship starts, the student and mentor sign a 'mentoring contract' stating their professional and personal learning goals and expectations. This may include the products the student will deliver — for example, both a thesis and a brief report with programme recommendations for Oxfam Novib.

Activities of the Oxfam Novib Academy include:

- *Regular workshops* to learn practical skills and exchange ideas among students and Oxfam Novib staff; and
- *Peer-to-peer learning sessions* for personal learning for both students and mentors.

For more information see <https://oxfamnovibacademy.wordpress.com/>

#### Topics to discuss together at the start of a new collaboration:

- To be answered by each stakeholder:
  - What are your professional and personal learning goals?
  - Which internship activities will help you develop these?
- How many days/hours a week will the student be present at the NGO? What will be the time spent on the research versus internship activities?
- Which facilities will the student need, and who will provide these? E.g. access to software, data, printing and photocopying, an office desk, email address, internship fee and transportation costs.

**Tip:** *If you find it difficult to formulate learning goals, search for vacancies of your dream job and see which knowledge and skills these jobs require.*

<sup>4</sup> For examples and formulating them in a SMART way, see: <https://www.ccis.edu/offices/campuslife/careerservices/internship/students/daystudents/learning-goal-sample-page.aspx>

## 2. The research proposal

### 2.1. A societally-relevant research proposal

Most universities have their own requirements for the research proposal. In addition to the conventional components of a research proposal, such as introduction, theoretical framework and methodology, students may decide to include a reflection on the **societal relevance** of their research. This is especially important when conducting a research for an NGO. For instance, what is the anticipated relevance of the research findings:

- For the various stakeholders involved, such as the collaborating NGOs and communities under study; and
- For policy and practice in general?

Adopting a **participatory action approach**<sup>5</sup> can enable students to involve stakeholders in their research process from the start, for instance in the development of research questions or in the formulation of recommendations or plan of action (see Figure 5 for inspiration). Such approaches can increase ownership in their research and, consequently, increase chances that their research findings will actually be used.

Students may also include a **plan of research uptake and dissemination** in their research proposal. This plan of research uptake and dissemination enables students to actually discuss and share their research findings with the perceived beneficiaries and to formulate and document implications together. Appropriate dissemination formats for target audiences working in policy and practice or the communities under study can include policy briefs, infographics, leaflets, and movies.



Figure 5 Suggestions for creating a "Road Map" (Share-Net Netherlands workshop at STI\*HIV\*Sex conference 2015)

<sup>5</sup> See for instance McIntyre, A. (2008). *Participatory action research* (Qualitative Research Methods 52 ed.). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

### Developing Societally-Relevant Research Questions

To stimulate student-NGO collaborations, Share-Net Netherlands organises the annual event “*Linking Research, Policy and Practice - Students and NGOs*”. This event welcomes students to present their thesis findings to policymakers and practitioners. Part of this meeting is the distribution of the “*Overview of SRHR knowledge questions from research, policy and practice*”. This annually-updated overview presents knowledge questions of Share-Net members working in policy and practice that students could work on in their thesis.

For more information about the event and the overview of societally-relevant knowledge questions, see <http://share-netinternational.org/4th-annual-meeting-linking-research-policy-practice/>

## 2.2. Ethics

Studies on sexual and reproductive health and rights often concern sensitive topics and the participation of vulnerable, stigmatised communities. NGOs can provide access to such communities which enables students to collect primary data. When collecting primary data, and especially in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights, it is always very important to adhere to basic ethical principles (Figure 6) and to include ethical considerations<sup>6</sup> in the research proposal, for instance with regard to obtaining informed consent. When students want to conduct fieldwork, they usually need to obtain ethical clearance from both the university and the country of study<sup>7</sup>. Nowadays, most peer-reviewed journals also require proof of ethical clearance before publication.

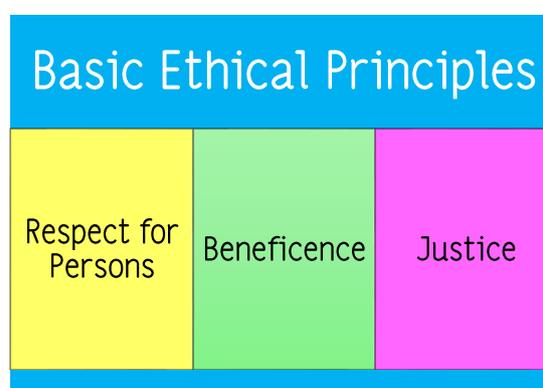


Figure 6 The Belmont Report (1979)

Some NGOs have also developed their own **Code of Conduct** which students need to adhere to. With regard to the research project, such guidelines may concern protecting the confidentiality of research participants.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Read more about research ethics in the Declaration of Helsinki: <https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki-ethical-principles-for-medical-research-involving-human-subjects/>

<sup>7</sup> As example for obtaining ethical clearance in a country of study, read more about Uganda’s research policy and guidelines: <https://uncst.go.ug/guidelines-and-forms/>

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Save the Children: <https://jobs.savethechildren.org.uk/our-policies/codeofconduct/>

### 2.3. Research planning, budget and facilities

It is important to discuss mutual expectations about the **research planning** and the payment of the costs involved. You may need to **budget** for fieldwork costs, a research permit, travel expenses and publication costs (see for Annex 1. Role perceptions checklist for additional suggestions). Part of these discussions can be the negotiation of an internship fee (Figure 7).

#### Internship fees

NGOs are not obliged to pay students an internship fee or to reimburse transportation costs, unless it is stated otherwise in their collective agreement (CAO). Although an internship is a great learning experience, it can be reasonable to negotiate a fee, especially when the NGO benefits from the collaboration. In general, FNV Jong indicates that internship fees are between €250-€350 a month, depending on educational level and relevant work experience. In addition to internship fees, you could discuss other facilities such as access to software; data; printing and photocopying; an office desk; email address; and, in the case of field work, fieldwork costs, safety training, travel insurance, and reimbursement of travel expenses.

More information (in Dutch): <https://fnvjong.nl/stage/stagevergoeding>

Figure 7 Internship fees

A detailed research planning will enable you to monitor the research progress and to reflect with the stakeholders involved whether the made agreements are still feasible or need adjustment. Figure 8 provides an example of a research planning and defines for each activity which stakeholders and budget are involved, and who is responsible for organising the activity or covering the costs (see Annex 1. Role perceptions checklist).

**Tip:** In case of fieldwork, do not forget to allocate sufficient time for obtaining ethical clearance in the country of study and to apply for fieldwork grants.

Period	Activity	Stakeholders involved	Budget	Responsibility (activity/budget)
.....	Development of research proposal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholder meeting</li> </ul>			
	Obtain ethical clearance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research permit</li> </ul>			
	Data collection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local transport</li> </ul>			
	Data analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholder meeting</li> </ul>			
	Research uptake <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design policy brief</li> </ul>			
	.....			
			<b>Total</b>	

Figure 8 Format for research and budget planning (to be aligned with your road map)

### 3. Expected output

#### 3.1. Output: innovative knowledge

Student-NGO collaborations offer the opportunity to strengthen linkages between research, policy and practice<sup>9</sup>. In the process of working together, the interdisciplinary dialogues between the student, university supervisor, NGO practitioners and communities under study can lead to new insights and even innovative or a new type of knowledge. For instance, students from various academic disciplines can provide new or complementary insights to the NGO by being critical and using different theories and methodologies. Vice versa, NGOs can challenge students to translate their findings to recommendations for improving policy and practice.

**Universities are recommended to initiate internal discussions to ensure that student internships are not only rewarded for the academic output but also for the societal impact.**

It is important that the stakeholders involved discuss their expectations about this output at the start of the new collaboration (see Figure 3). For instance, it could be discussed that the student will write a thesis and include an extensive section with recommendations. However, it can be difficult for students to write one product that satisfies all stakeholders involved. Therefore, it may be decided that the student writes a separate two-page factsheet for the NGO and gives an oral presentation at the NGO office. For communities under study, another format may be more appropriate. For instance, Shirish Darak developed seven booklets on sexual and reproductive health and rights related issues for HIV-infected couples in India based on the findings of his PhD research and shared these with clients from the NGO he worked with to help them accept and cope with their infection.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Factsheets for Policy and Practice**

One way of translating your thesis findings into an attractive format for policymakers and practitioners is by writing a two-page factsheet. This method for disseminating your findings is encouraged by the Academic Collaborative Centre for Public Health initiative (in Dutch: Academische Werkplaats) in the Dutch province of Limburg. They stimulate students to study research questions formulated by municipalities. During the research process, the students are in close contact with, and present their findings to, the municipality. Based on the findings, the student and the municipality together develop recommendations for policy. Consequently, the research findings and their recommendations are summarized in two-page factsheets which are distributed among the municipalities or other target audiences and published on the Collaborative Centre's website. These factsheets can be found (in Dutch) at <http://www.academischewerkplaatslimburg.nl/factsheets/>

#### 3.2. Ownership of data and intellectual property rights

It is important to discuss the ownership, safe use and storage of data and intellectual property rights at the start of the collaboration. In case of a scientific publication, it is important to discuss whether the stakeholders involved will become co-author<sup>11</sup> or acknowledged in the publication. Universities will probably require students to single-author the scientific publication that will be graded. Then after grading, others may co-author to turn the publication into a manuscript that is ready to be submitted to a scientific journal.

<sup>9</sup> For more information: de Haas, B., & van der Kwaak, A. (2017). Exploring linkages between research, policy and practice in the Netherlands: Perspectives on sexual and reproductive health and rights knowledge flows. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 15(1), 40. doi:10.1186/s12961-017-0201-0

<sup>10</sup> <http://share-netinternational.org/report-usefulness-research-based-narrative-health-communication-material/>

<sup>11</sup> Read more about recognition of co-authorship: <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/Intellectual-Property-Guidelines.aspx>

## Annex 1. Role perceptions checklist

The following considerations are based on the Role Perceptions Rating Scale<sup>12</sup>

### Topic/course of the research, guidance and support

- *Who* will mentor the student at the NGO and during fieldwork, e.g. a local contact person?
- *Who* is responsible for selecting a promising topic for the research?
- *Who* is responsible for monitoring the progress of the research? How?
- *Which* facilities will the student need, and *who* will provide these?
  - E.g. access to software, data, printing and photocopying, an office desk, email address, internship fee and transportation costs; and
  - in the case of field work, fieldwork costs, safety training, travel insurance, and reimbursement of travel expenses.

### Thesis and/or other research output

- *Who* is responsible for the theoretical framework, methodology and content of the thesis?
- *Who* is responsible for ethical clearance for the study? How will ethical clearance be obtained?
- *Who* will provide feedback on drafts of the thesis, how often, and when?
- *Who* is responsible for grading the thesis?
- *Who* decides on the format of the thesis? Any university/departmental requirements? Will there be a separate product for the NGO?
- *Into what extent* is the student responsible for the presentation of the thesis and/or other research outputs, including design, grammar and spelling?
- *What* should be the time frame for the research? What happens if the student does not meet the deadline?

### Research uptake

- *Which* opportunities will the student have to share the research proposal and findings with the study participants and relevant practitioners and policymakers to ensure:
  - the proposed research is societally relevant,
  - data validation, and
  - formulation of recommendations for policy and practice?
- *Into what extent* will the student be able to network with professionals and develop career perspectives? How?
- *Into what extent* will the findings from this research be disseminated, e.g. at conferences, in academic journals, at the NGO website? Via which channels? Who will author publications? Who will pay for any dissemination and/or publication costs involved?

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<sup>12</sup> Edwards, H., Aspland, T., O'Leary, J., Ryan, Y., Southey, G., & Timms, P. (1995). *Tracking postgraduate supervision*. Brisbane: Academic Staff Development Unit.

## Annex 2. Format for drafting an agreement

To be used by NGOs and universities to streamline communication between them in relation to student research assignments/internships. For the Word document, click [here](#).

### 1. Front page:

- Title; name researcher/student, academic supervisor, NGO/implementing NGO supervisor/coach; date

### 2. Introduction

- Introduction to the topic/assignment
- Research questions/objectives of the research
- Research methodology
- Objectives of [internship/student-NGO collaboration], taking into account:
  - **Expectations** and **personal and professional growth** of student/researcher and NGO/educational institute/implementing NGO supervisors, e.g.
    - This internship is a success, when ....
    - My personal learning objective is ... [e.g. coaching and mentoring skills].
    - What I expect from [the student/my supervisors], is ....
    - What [the student/my supervisors] can expect from me, is.....;
  - Strengthening linkages between research, policy and practice.

### 3. Expected output

- E.g. **presentation** of findings by researcher for [NGO]. This product is expected to be delivered [after completion of the thesis at [name educational institute]]. The student retains full copyright to this material.
- E.g. a courtesy copy of the **final thesis** paper. This product is expected to be delivered [date/after completion and approval of the thesis at [name educational institute]]. The student retains full copyright to this material.
- E.g. a **lessons learned technical brief** based on the research findings. After finishing the research, the researcher and NGO will collaboratively develop a technical brief in [language], including recommendations for policy and practice. This product is expected to be delivered [date]. The technical brief will consist of [number of pages] and be created according to [NGO] standards.

### 4. Collaboration and division of tasks

This is a collaboration between [NGO] and [educational institute]. The involved partners are [e.g. implementing NGO where research will be conducted]. We agree upon the following division of responsibilities:

- The internship **agreement** starts on [date] and ends on [date]. The student/researcher works on the basis of [hours per week]. [Student/researcher] is present at the [NGO/implementing NGO] office on [weekly days].
- The student/researcher will adhere to the [NGO/implementing NGO] ethical **code of conduct**, including confidentiality of research participants.

#### 4.1. Guidance and support

- The student/researcher will be allowed to **participate** in [NGO/implementing NGO] meetings and activities considered relevant for the research or contributing to the internship objectives.
- The [educational institute] provides the student/researcher methodological **support and guidance** concerning research procedures. The educational institute is **responsible** for the final qualification

of the research, taking into consideration the inputs delivered by [NGO] and its implementing partner.

- A [NGO] and [implementing NGO] coach, which will be [name] and [name], will be assigned to provide [**supportive assistance/on-site supervision**] to the student/researcher. The [supportive assistance/on-site supervision] to the student/researcher will consist of [hours per week].
- [implementing NGO] will identify a **local point of contact** responsible for immediate details of the research project and will provide a **working space** at [implementing NGO] to the student/researcher and will –when requested- strive to facilitate **access** of the researcher to participants for data collection.
- [NGO] provides the student/researcher with an **internship fee** of [Euros] per month for the duration of [number of months] and **reimburses** [e.g. international travel and living expenses].
- **Interim evaluations** and a **feedback session** will take place [date/after completion of (see planning)] between [educational institute supervisor], [student], [coach NGO] and [coach implementing NGO] to address the objectives of the research and internship.

#### 4.2. Research

- [NGO] requests the deliverables within the framework of [project]. The data collected within the framework of the agreement is **property** of the [student/researcher], [educational institute], [NGO] and [implementing NGO].
- The products expected in this agreement will be **developed** by [student/researcher] and according to this agreement signed with [NGO] and [implementing NGO].
- In publications, the student/researcher will **acknowledge** all relevant partners who have contributed to the work being published.
- [NGO] coordinates the **linkage** between the local programme needs and the larger programme priorities.

#### 5. Planning, budget and responsibilities

Period	Activity	Stakeholders involved	Budget	Responsibility (activity/budget)
			<b>Total</b>	

In agreement,

.....  
Signature [student/researcher]

.....  
Signature [NGO]

.....  
Signature [educational institute/supervisor]

.....  
Signature [implementing NGO]