

Best Practices for Vetting Third Party Internship Providers

Deciding to intern abroad is a huge step, one that will differentiate you from your peers and broaden your horizons. For many, interning abroad is a once in a lifetime opportunity and a transformative experience. How do you pick the right program? Here are a few critical questions you should ask.

Track Record

How long has the organization been around?

Perhaps one of the biggest indicators of a quality provider is how long they have been operating programs. A healthy track record with years of experience usually means an organization has worked out the kinks that come with starting a complex international program. Make sure to ask not only how long they've been around but, specifically, how long they have run programs with an internship component.

How many interns have they placed over the years?

For internships specifically, it's important to ensure that the organization you choose has successfully connected hundreds (or thousands) of students with employers. Matchmaking is difficult work, and an organization with success on a large scale reinforces that they know what they are doing.

How long have they operated in the city that you are considering?

It takes a few years to get an international program running smoothly. From having reliable housing partners to well-established employer networks and local support systems, you want to ensure you're not a guinea pig!

Where is the organization based?

Are they located in the United States? If the organization is in the US, you know that they conform to US laws and you have means for legal recourse should you encounter any issues. If they are based outside of your home country, it doesn't mean they're inadequate or unreliable, it simply means they operate under different guidelines, so US standards may not apply.

Are they contributors within the international education community?

You're looking to go abroad to enhance your academic experience. It makes sense to go through an organization that is closely involved in the academic community. Having the acknowledgment and approval of educators is typically an indirect endorsement of the quality of a program provider.

Which universities do they partner with?

If you can't find any universities that endorse them, it may be a sign that they aren't established enough in quality or history to meet the standards of a higher education institution. Universities spend months or sometimes years vetting third party providers, collaborating on programming, and going through legal paperwork and risk assessment. If an organization has solid relationships with several schools, they likely have already done the vetting for you!

Do they have a social media presence? Photos of interns, blogs, etc.

Any organization that has been around for a while should have a robust social media following and lots of pictures, videos, blog posts, and testimonials related to the programs and their participants. Organizations that aren't putting positive stories and groups of students front and center may not have either.

Can you talk to alumni/references?

Organizations with a solid track record are usually able to track down an alum or two for you to speak with. While not always a necessity, it can be helpful to speak with someone who is not on the organization's payroll to hear an unbiased account of the program that you are exploring.

Transparency and Accountability

What is their internship placement method like?

How do they match you with the right host company and position for you? A quality internship is arguably the most important part of your program, so you'll want to get as much detail as possible on how they work behind the scenes to ensure a great opportunity for you. If you get an extremely vague answer or it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Do you get to interview with your potential supervisor or is the match confirmed for you without a formal conversation?

You'll want to get as much information about the company, culture, and role before confirming your internship, and an interview with your supervisor will be the best way to ensure that you are a good fit for the company. If you are matched with a company without that ability to confirm a good match, you may encounter issues or differing expectations when you arrive.

Do they outsource placement matching to other partners?

This is a big deal. Many program providers use other local companies with connections to place you in an internship. While it allows providers to offer many different programs around the world, the accountability and quality of the match can vary dramatically. The third party you're speaking with may simply be a middleman, and they've outsourced the placement to another company in your desired city. You want to make sure that the internship and experience you discuss with the company that has your deposit is able to deliver on their promise and it's not lost in translation.

Do they have direct relationships with the supervisors at the host companies?

There are huge advantages to going through an organization that has their own employer relationships to monitor and maintain their placements. It ensures a better match, consistent standards on internship quality, quick and easy communication, and direct accountability if there are any issues during the internship.

Do they have their own staff on the ground?

Again, this goes back to accountability and ensuring a great standard of quality. If a program has their own staff on the ground, it ensures a consistent program delivery. Working through partners can create an added risk of inconsistent program quality and a lack of clarity or lag in communication. Also, is the on-ground staff local to the area or flown in just for the program? Having a local expert will prove to be super helpful if you need advice and recommendations or in case of an emergency.

Is a placement in your career field 100% guaranteed?

...Or will you be stuck somewhere that has nothing to do with your career goals? If a company can't guarantee you an internship in your field of interest, it may not be worth committing. You don't want to invest time and money into a program only to have to start from the beginning if it doesn't pan out. The good follow up question is, how can they guarantee it? The answer should go back to their track record.

Will you have your internship confirmed before you arrive on location?

Some providers can ensure your internship well before you take off for your program, with others you may have to wait until you arrive. This can also vary by location where in-person interviews that require language skills commonly take place after arrival in non-English speaking countries. This may also be the case for internships in industries such as fashion, entertainment, or other client-facing, image-based companies.

Will you have a dedicated point of contact?

You're going to have tons of questions before you travel abroad, and it's helpful to have a central person who knows you and understands what you're looking to accomplish while abroad. No one wants to talk through their unique situation again and again, especially if serious issues arise.

What are their health and safety protocols?

Health and safety abroad is something that isn't fun or particularly interesting to talk about, but it's incredibly important. You'll want to ensure the organization you go through has comprehensive systems in place and isn't winging it as things come up.

Features

What happens during the preparation stage? How do you get information and advice?

The process of preparing for an international program requires responsibility and collaboration from both you and the provider. Perhaps the most underrated aspect of a program can be its pre-departure preparation. How do they send you the materials and information you need: mail, email, webinars, website/webportal? How do you send them your information? Do they include career development coaching such as resume and cover letter review, interview preparation, and discussions about your chosen career field and what to expect in your work environment overseas? Are they responsive and timely in answering your questions? An experience abroad can be a huge professional catalyst – if you're prepared for it.

Does the provider help with the visa process?

For some locations you'll need a visa, and some visas can be a time- and labor-intensive process. Most providers will offer visa assistance as navigating a complex process on your own can result in mistakes and the inability to get your visa on time. A good provider should be able to guide you step-by-step through the correct process.

Is housing included? Where is it located, and what is it like?

When you're not working or exploring abroad, you'll spend quite a bit of time hanging out in your housing. You'll want to make sure it's centrally located, close to public transportation, safe, and has the essential amenities. Keep in mind that common amenities in your home country may not be standard in your host country such as Wi-Fi, air conditioning, dishwasher, laundry facilities, etc. Will you have to pay extra for a safety deposit, utilities, linens, laundry, mailbox, gym access, etc.? Ask for a description and location on a map as well as photos to ensure you have the right expectations about what housing is like in another country.

What else is included in the price? Meals? Transportation? Language training? Social events?

There can be sticker shock looking at the cost of an international program, but it's important to account for all the costs during your life-changing experience. A program may look cheap, but double-check to see if these things are included or a la carte.

Is academic credit included?

Many people pursue an international internship for the sake of the experience. For some, gaining credit and potentially having access to academic financial aid can be a huge bonus. Determine how important credit is to you. If the answer is “extremely important,” see if there is credit built into the program that can transfer back to your home university, or find out if your school will grant credit for an internship in your major. If you have an internship requirement for graduation, it can make things fairly easy. Make sure to ask the provider if they can meet all of the requirements outlined in the terms of your school’s academic credit such as minimum number of hours, supervisor qualifications, specific projects or tasks as part of the job, etc.

What happens after the program?

Going abroad is an incredible experience and a lot to take in. When it ends, what type of evaluation or support is available? There should be some sort of exit orientation and/or survey for you to give your feedback and reflect on your experience as a whole and what it means for your future. Is there follow up from the provider when you return or is there reintegration support available? Getting back to “normal” life at home can be a challenge if you experience reverse culture shock or you feel a lack of direction at the end of your program.

Is there an alumni network to tap into after your program?

You're going to have fun abroad, but the main purpose of an international internship program is to differentiate yourself in a professional capacity from your peers. It's a nice plus to be able to connect with other alumni who are now working in their fields in the US or overseas. They can relate to your experience, overcoming challenges, and personal growth of living and working abroad; not to mention, they may be able to give you a connection to get hired when you finish your program.