eWBL – Making work-based learning work in an online environment

National Case Studies – Italy (WP1)

28/02/2023

Exploring the challenges met and the alternatives found by WBL providers across Europe in their shift from WBL to eWBL.

Prepared by Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini e Università Ca'Foscari Venezia teams

Co-funded by the European Union

PROJECT PARTNERS

university of groningen

Università Ca'Foscari Venezia

Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini

Univerza v Ljubljani

momentum
[educate + innovate]

FH MÜNSTER
University of Applied Sciences

Co-funded by the European Union

Introduction

The importance of work-based learning (WBL) in developing work-ready graduates has been documented by several EU-funded projects such as HAPHE (2016), WBLIC (2016), and WEXHE (2020). WBL is a powerful pedagogy to foster graduate work readiness because it is embedded in authentic work environments. As work is increasingly delivered remotely, a new and digital form of WBL has emerged recently – this is what this project calls “eWBL”.

The main aim of the project is to upskill educators in HE (lecturers, trainers, and administrative staff) on how to design and deliver high-quality eWBL. To reach this goal, the project will explore how 25 high-quality WBL providers across Europe have dealt with the pedagogical and technological challenges associated with the transition from WBL to eWBL and the solutions they have devised. The investigation will result in frameworks and replicable models, a toolkit, open educational resources (OERs), capacity-building activities, and multiplier events that will help train those involved in WBL provision in HE.

We aim to boost the work readiness and employability of graduates. The project will specifically focus on how work-based learning competencies could be fostered in the absence of a physical environment. As the work environment is increasingly shifting to online and hybrid formats, ways of making work-based learning effective in this new environment have become an urgent need of educators across the EU. The project addresses this specific need by developing frameworks, tools, and guidelines that educators in HE (lecturers, trainers, and administrative staff) could use to deliver high-quality eWBL.

More information about the project, together with updates and materials, can be found at https://www.ewbl-project.com

About this document

The first step to achieving the project aim was to collect and analyze data to create the 25 case studies that serve as our primary data source. Each project consortium member (FH Münster in Germany, Momentum in Ireland, the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini and University of Venice in Italy, and The University of Groningen in the Netherlands) was responsible for designing five cases. This National Report offers an overview of the five case studies produced in Italy.

The document is divided into seven chapters. In chapter one, we offer an overview of the WBL scenario in Italy based on desk research and results from the Erasmus+ WEXHE Project (WEXHE, 2020). In chapter two, we give an overview of how WBL was delivered before the COVID-19 pandemic when it was delivered completely “offline”. In chapter three, we explore how the parties involved (companies and higher education institutions (HEIs)) implemented eWBL. In chapter four, we investigate the implications of this transition on expected WBL learning outcomes: soft skills development, acquisition of practical experience, networking, and the understanding of the company/workplace culture. Chapter five discusses the main drivers and challenges associated with remote WBL, while chapter six details the solution and pedagogical innovation introduced by companies and HEIs. Finally, chapter seven explores the long-term implication of eWBL to Italian companies, students, and HEIs.

METHODOLOGY

This National Report summarises the findings of the six Italian cases.

The first step to creating them was to identify an extensive list of potential cases. We spent one month doing this through desk research, previous contacts from the lead researcher, and indications from Ca'Foscari's career services. The preliminary list included seven potential cases. From this list, we selected six to be translated into full cases. The main selection criteria were the diversity of disciplinary areas and HEIs providing it.

After identifying the six most promising cases, we spend approximately one-month contacting stakeholders to arrange interviews. The list of stakeholders included trainers in HE, trainers in the organizations, and students or alumni. The next two months were dedicated to data collection. The interview questions were developed by the consortium and essentially covered: How WBL was provided before COVID-19, the challenges encountered in shifting to eWBL, and the alternatives or solutions found in response. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. All interviews were conducted in English. In total, 20 stakeholders were interviewed: 06 representatives of HEIs, 06 internship supervisors at the companies, and 08 students or alumni.

The data analysis adheres to Miles et al. (2014) following an explanatory stance using analytic progression. From respondents' raw data, we extracted the most relevant concepts. We then grouped these concepts according to their contribution to the dimensions we wanted to investigate: (i) How WBL was provided before COVID-19, (ii) the challenges encountered in shifting to eWBL, including the implications on WBL learning outcomes (soft skills, practical experience, networking, and workplace culture), and (iii) the alternatives/solutions found.

The result of this analytical process is the six case studies that comprise the core data of this National Report. It is possible to see the six case studies in the annex section.

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

Summary – Italy

Questo rapporto studia il processo di migrazione dal tirocinio in presenza (work-based learning - WBL) alla modalità online (eWBL) durante la pandemia del COVID-19.

In condizioni decisamente non ideali e con la necessità per le aziende di adattarsi rapidamente alle condizioni che si presentavano, questi casi di studio affrontano sia le difficoltà incontrate nel processo, sia le soluzioni trovate, e l'impatto di questo cambiamento sullo sviluppo delle competenze degli tirocinanti.

Nel caso dell'Italia, oggetto di questo doccumento, sono stati realizzati 06 casi di studio, provenienti da diverse aree di competenza (Risorse Umane, Amministrazione, Finanza, Economiae e Gestione, Foreign Trade, Social Media, Marketing e Comunicazione, Pianificazione Urbana e Politiche Territoriali, Gestione dell'Innovazione e della Tecnologia.) da 3 differenti istituzioni distribuite in varie regioni del Paese. Gli stage si sono svolti tra l'ottobre 2020 e il febbraio 2022 e sono durati tra i 05 e i 06 mesi.

È emerso un certo consenso riguardo all'impatto dello stage a distanza sullo sviluppo di competenze degli stagosti quali l'indipendenza, il pensiero analitico e la gestione del tempo, competenze che sono molto apprezzate negli ambienti professionali del futuro, secondo diversi studi di settore, come ad esempio quello della World Economic Forum del 2020 (WEF, 2020). Allo stesso tempo, gli stage a distanza hanno anche impedito agli stagisti di sviluppare totalmente competenze relazionali e di acquisire la cultura aziendale delle società in generale.

Nonostante il massiccio tentativo delle aziende di accogliere gli stagisti durante il programma e di integrarli in azienda, grazie anche agli sforzi della maggior parte delle HEIs (higher education institution - istituto di istruzione superiore) nel sensibilizzare pprofessori e aziende a favore del lavoro a distanza, abbiamo potuto notare che le innovazioni e le soluzioni applicate variavano molto, soprattutto in base al livello di sviluppo digitale che le aziende avevano già raggiunto, essendo importante adattare il processo di migrazione da WBL a eWBL in modo realistico alle capacità finanziarie e alle risorse delle aziende.

Inoltre, è evidente che la formazione online o ibrida non è una soluzione omogenea e che non deve essere applicata a qualsiasi tipo di tirocinanti, poichè richiede una valutazione dei profili degli stagisti che meglio si adattano a questo tipo di formazione, oltre a una chiara definizione degli obiettivi da raggiungere alla fine del processo adattata a ogni profilo.

In ogni caso, sia in relazione agli impatti che l'eWBL ha portato nell'equilibrio del rapporto lavoro/vita personale, sia per le competenze sviluppate, il cambiamento di mentalità rispetto al tema è una strada senza ritorno. È quindi importante che le aziende ospitanti e l'HEI si adattino per consentire agli tirocinanti una maggiore flessibilità in relazione al modello di formazione che preferiscono seguire, riuscendo così a trattenere e attrarre i migliori talenti.

L'obiettivo del rapporto e dei casi di studio è quello di indicare le migliori pratiche osservate, di evidenziare le soluzioni proposte dalle aziende e dall'HEIs per ridurre al minimo le sfide che questo modello di formazione affronta, e quindi di ampliare la discussione sul tema e la consapevolezza dei benefici che l'eWBL può aggiungere allo sviluppo della forza lavoro.

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

Table of Contents

Introduction 3
Summary – Italy 5
1. Background 7
2. The WBL pre-COVID-19 8
3. The eWBL implementation 9
4. Impact of eWBL on learning outcomes 11
4.1 soft-skills development 12
4.2 Acquisition of practical experience 12
4.3 Networking 13
4.4 Company/organizational culture 13
5. Drivers and challenges to EWBL 13
6. Developed solutions 15
7. Long-term implications of eWBL 17
8. BIBLIOGRAPHY 17
Annexes ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Case Studies Reports ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

1. Background

A context of the Italian Higher Education system reforms:

The Italian higher education system includes different types of institutions: universities, the Institute for Art, Music, and Dance, private institutions awarding recognized qualifications, and technical institutions providing short-term tertiary education (ITS, Istituti Tecnici Superiori).

In its most recent reform, started after the Bologna Process implementation in 1999, the Universities gained full autonomy in management, finance, teaching, and course planning.

Throughout the years, national authorities also have been defining regulatory frameworks and incentives to encourage HEIs towards improvements in the efficiency of the system, diversify their strategies and missions (including teaching, research, and civic engagement) and strengthen their connections with the labour market and its needs.

The Ministry of University established that internships had to become part of an educational methodology to familiarise the trainees with the labour market and improve their employability, turning them mandatory during the courses of studies. Also, to achieve the above results, the program should meet some quality standards related to the degree program's learning goals and be based on an appropriate educational project monitored by the academic and the company tutors.

Another fundamental reflex of the reform was the Career Services setting up to strengthen the ties between university and industry through initiatives' development to satisfy the fast-changing labour market needs. Generally, they are responsible for managing internships in Italy and abroad (for example, Erasmus+ for traineeship), organising recruiting events, company visits and presentations to gain field experience, and mock interviews with professional career counsellors.

Regardless of these initiatives, we still see substantial heterogeneity in the Italian HE system today, both in the institutions' size and geographic location. According to the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR), the activities carried out by HEIs that go beyond teaching and research functions are carried out mainly by medium and large universities and tend to be more frequent in the north of the country (ANVUR, 2016). Definitively, a point of attention due to the possible impact of the satisfactory deployment of WBL in the country.

The internship's dynamics in Italy:

In Italy, internships do not consist of an employment relationship but a period of training and orientation on the job. The experience can take place at public and private employers, is mainly promoted by employment centres, universities, schools, accredited vocational guidance and training centres, and can be divided into the following macro-typologies:

Curricular traineeships: comprising obligatory activities and recognizing the training hours as CFU (formative university credits, ECTS), contributing to degree acquisition. They are intended for students in vocational education and training courses, high school and university students, and aim at enriching and integrating the learning and training process through direct experience with the world of work; Curricular internships are not regulated yet, and it is the HEIs' role to define their dynamic and implementation.

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

Summer internships: intended for adolescents and young people enrolled in a university or an educational institution of all levels. They take place between the end of the school or academic year and the beginning of the following.

Extracurricular internships: these are regulated by the autonomous regions and provinces. Their activities and hours are not graded and recognised for diploma granting and therefore are not the focus of this report. There are three types of extracurricular internships:

- Training and orientation internships: intended for individuals who have obtained an educational qualification for no more than 12 months, aiming at facilitating the vocational and employability of young people, and have a maximum duration of 6 months;
- Work placement/re-entry traineeships aimed at the unemployed, unemployable, and workers suspended under lay-off schemes.
- Orientation and training or job placement/return to work internships favouring the disabled, disadvantaged individuals, and asylum seekers.

There are two documents to activate a curricular internship, the agreement signed between the promoting party and the host party; and the training project signed by the host subject, the promoting subject, and the intern. In this document, the intern's rights are also defined while taking the program:

- Be supervised by a company mentor,
- Be supervised by a tutor from the promoting entity,
- Be insured against accidents at work with Inail (Istituto Nazionale Assicurazione Infortuni sul Lavoro - National Labor Accident Insurance Institute) and for third-party liability with a suitable insurance company,
- Receive adequate information and training in occupational health and safety during the internship's onboarding phase.

Internships and COVID-19

Regarding the COVID-19 situation, the pandemic obliged universities to move all their activities online: lessons, exams, degree sessions, and traineeships. Each region established its own set of rules and regulations to carry out the training remotely, mirroring the enormous heterogeneity already discussed regarding HEIs in Italy and consequently impacting eWBL practices in the country, as discussed in the following sections.

2. WBL pre-COVID-19

As stated in the previous chapter, although Italian HEIs follow a national guideline, each institution has total autonomy to decide the internship's goals and final assessment parameters, implying heterogeneous program offers and the different levels of HEI interference in traineeship programs all over the country.

In our research, we could observe that in some cases, HEI's career services were very active in the search for the best opportunities, trainee support, and internship follow-up routines (cases 01 to 04). In others, they were dealing with bureaucratic and internship insurance issues or playing a very secondary or little role in the process (cases 05 and 06).

The interviews revealed a disparity in the interns' opinions, with some being satisfied with the training, job hunting, and CV advice services. Others reported finding the opportunities independently due to the lack of appealing offers and having little knowledge of the internship's plan, final evaluation criteria, and precise information about the host companies.

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, culturally in Italy, there was no recognition of remote internships, with the vast majority being in-person opportunities. Thus, even though the HEIs had remote follow-up processes and dynamics already established, there was an impressive scale-up in online activity at the beginning of the pandemic, representing an overload for the placement team.

From the tutors (teachers) and intern relationship point of view, all respondents said that remote monitoring through video calls was already a constant practice, not representing relevant processes adaptation. However, HEIs applied outstanding effort in convincing internship academic supervisors to change education credits granting criteria considering the specifics of the remote internship. Also, HEIs' efforts to challenge the existing bias against online placements required netiquette and videoconference classes included in the trainees' pre-internship preparatory courses, for instance.

Concerning internships' bureaucratic and procedural issues, some companies reported that HEIs' adaptation did not follow the same digitalisation pace required by the market. The requirement of signed printed forms instead of having a 100% online procedure, a point that certainly deserves attention. Another critical point noticed is that many interns reported an absence of changes in their final evaluation compared to the pre-covid dynamics, which may indicate a need to closely monitor the impact of eWBL on skills that remote activities may hinder.

From the companies' point of view, the internship impacts regarding the transition to remote working varied substantially depending to their level of digitalisation level, both in terms of equipment and the digital culture of senior employees. When dynamics, equipment, security systems & sensitive data protection, and management processes existed and were already defined, the transition from in-person to remote work ran smoothly with an adaptation period substantially shorter than the companies that had to draw up new processes from scratch. In addition, companies taking their first steps in the digitalisation process need a careful assessment and improvement of employees' netiquette skills to avoid trainee socialisation difficulties, as mentioned in case 05, when most employees kept their cameras off during meetings.

One point that seems constant to all pre-Covid internships concerns a certain informality in socialising and monitoring the interns' progress, team integration, and internal climate, that was hindered during the remote traineeship. Companies' leaders reported that coffee hours, lunches, or conversations in the hallway, allowed them to monitor the trainees without a specific meeting. Something similar also happened regarding the corporate culture and technical-specific knowledge transmission since the shared office space could create opportunities for trainees to observe the company's daily routine and absorb knowledge. This was hindered in remote internships.

The final difference with pre-Covid internships concerns the activities interns were able to do. With direct monitoring of trainees limited, some companies chose to give them more operational activities with strong theoretical involvement to allow for less manager mentoring and make the remote internship feasible (case 06). Thus, it will be necessary in the future to evaluate which activities would be more applicable in remote internships and which trainee profiles would be more appropriate for this dynamic.

3. eWBL implementation

Of the 8 interns interviewed 5 did fully remote internships while 3 had the opportunity to do blended mode internships, alternating in-person and online work periods. The experiences took place between October 2020

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

and February 2022, lasted six months, and in one case (06), the trainee received a non-curricular internship offer to keep working after the mandatory period.

The eWBL implementation challenge enabled the application of different approaches according to the HEIs, the companies' level of digitalisation, and the tutors' and interns' initiatives.

In general, not all HEIs provided intensive support for staff to adapt to remote working, but when offered, training courses comprised of computer skills development and IT support for professionals unfamiliar with remote working technology and programs.

The research appointed the following best practices offered by HEIs to interns and companies during the transition from WBL to eWBL:

- "Info-desks" were scheduled to support the trainees who had to carry out their remote placement: the staff underlined the importance of updating the attendance register, netiquette, and the IT tools at their disposal to communicate with the relevant parties.
- Online training courses before starting the placement to develop soft and IT skills.
- Online events with corporate partners (recruiting days, company presentations, etc.) to better explain the pros and cons of remote working and prepare trainees
- Trainees' follow-up by tutors via MS Teams or phone (although this was already a common practice pre-COVID-19).

In addition, in several cases, Career Service played an intermediary role, aiming to accommodate the interns, teachers, companies, and government interests, proving to be a fundamental influence on the WBL to eWBL transition. The HEIs advocated for remote work benefits among companies and teachers, assisted in the adaption of internship tasks to the online environment, helped tutors to re-evaluate the validation criteria of ETC credits, or offered complementary activities in cases of insufficient credits, and through these, allowed the trainees to graduate. The HEIs were also involved in the program remodelling due to sanitary legislation and the interns' insurance cover renegotiation. Both crucial to enable the online internships to happen.

Regarding the companies, the eWBL implementation process depended a lot on the company's stage of digitalisation and internal remote work culture., A substantial disparity was found among the companies surveyed.

The transition was easier and faster for companies with already standardised systems and processes, elements that also assured teachers regarding the eWBL's plan validation. However, that was not the situation faced by most companies, which had to adapt in terms of infrastructure, remote access permissions, equipment, and protection of sensitive data, for example.

Regarding equipment, the trainees generally received a laptop with the programs and systems already installed even though sometimes they choose to use their equipment. There was a wide variety of software used in the transition to online work: G-suite, MS Teams, Slack, Zoom, Blue Jeans, Google Meets, Microsoft Dynamics, and Dropbox, In some cases it was companies' driven or HEIs' standards, while at other times a result of the interns, tutors, and teachers' initiative.

During the onboarding process, the trainees were in the office for a few days or weeks, if permitted by sanitary legislation, enabling them to understand the corporate culture, learn the activities to be developed, and get acquainted with their colleagues. Usually, the employees worked in a rotating scheme of 4 days remote working and 01 day in-person, which reduced crowding and allowed social distancing (case 05). When hybrid

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

work was not possible, the welcome was online, although not having the same contribution to the trainee's socialisation.

Interns unanimously reported great proximity with their tutors on a positive note. They often defined the daily activities to be executed together and monitored them through daily, weekly and monthly meetings, using excel spreadsheets or specific management programs.

Some companies also opted for management by goals instead of strict control of working hours, relieving managers from the trainees' monitoring process. Other companies adjusted the task to the specificities of remote work, including more theoretical work, activities that required concentration, or allowed transversal soft skills development. Activities requiring less direct supervision were prioritised particularly the ones demanding more intense training, such as customer service (case 06).

More structured companies developed distance learning platforms and offered courses such as foreign languages, HR, management, AI, and cyber security, allowing employees and trainees to have tailor-made training according to their professional interests and skill development needs (cases 01, 02, 04, and 05). These platforms were also a positive solution for better corporate culture transmission during the onboarding phase, hampered by the physical distance of remote work. Companies with fewer resources could find creative ways to overcome similar challenges by using shared folders and servers such as Dropbox to share bibliographies and reference materials, trying to mitigate the social distance impact on industry-specific knowledge transmission (case 06).

Daily, some companies, due to the possibility of more people connecting via video conferencing, allowed the trainees to participate in strategic meetings, including meetings in other business units and countries. This enabled trainees to be exposed to more diverse contexts and experiences than they perhaps would not have had the opportunity to experience in face-to-face internships. On the negative side, corporate culture transmission, networking, and social integration were undoubtedly hindered by social distance, having an unwelcome impact on WBL to eWBL transition. Even with initiatives such as digital coffee breaks and happy hours, the creation of WhatsApp groups, or other integration activities they were unable to bring employees together in physical environments. Also, the lack of informal occasions in the company required more intensive, close, and intentional follow-up by managers to evaluate the company's climate and the trainees' adaptation. On the one hand, this brought an overload for leaders, but proved to be very positive for the trainees to feel secure and confident, allowing them to develop greater autonomy at a later stage. In any case, the trainees who had the opportunity to do a hybrid internship defend the need for at least some face-to-face time to allow them a more immediate understanding of the corporate culture and the establishment of social bonding.

Finally, it is crucial to emphasise the need for digital culture development in companies in general. Many senior employees weren't familiar with netiquette, leaving their cameras turned off in meetings, for example (case 05), and thus, contributing to a feeling of displacement and isolation among interns and new employees, an extremely delicate point when it comes to interns' first professional experiences.

4. Impact of eWBL on learning outcomes

On average, companies, HEIs, and interns saw internships in a very positive way. However, it is worth noting that in one of the cases (05), the perception of the results was diverse among the interviewees, pointing to the need for greater clarity in the program's objectives and the evaluation and success parameters shared by all involved.

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

In addition, an issue that became clear in the interviews was the useful professional competencies development that eWBL leverages, while at the same time, the modality represents a major obstacle to the intern's integration and corporate culture acquisition. This is a relevant point when dealing with first professional experiences. Thus, a hybrid work model that can balance the various needs and advantages of both work models (remote and face-to-face) should be a goal to be pursued.

Some of the interviews also reinforced the need for a correct and in-depth behavioural specificities assessment of each trainee and the subsequent best training modality definition (remote, on-site, or hybrid) to increase the possibility of the program's success and the full development of the intern's potential. Below, we go into more detail about some specific competencies developed through eWBL:

4.1 Soft-skills development

According to the majority of respondents, the WBL, in general, allows the development of various skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, analytical thinking, corporate etiquette (interactions/communication with senior professionals), and synthesis of ideas. Competencies such as creativity, flexibility, negotiation, and decision-making, were also mentioned, but by a smaller number of people. The collected answers and the task descriptions indicated that these skills could be developed regardless of the program's modality (face-to-face or remote).

However, competencies, such as project/time management, independence, and assertive language, are more related to activities stimulated through the remote environment provided for the trainees. The social isolation and forced digital transition helped the development of digital technology and etiquette skills. In any case, as highlighted in study 05, the exchange between tech-born trainees and senior analogical professionals can create a complementarity that, more than digital upskilling, can benefit the overall company.

Another relevant question is how much eWBL allowed active learning development. Distance has forced companies to be creative in the technical and specific knowledge transmission that, before, could be acquired more intuitively through observation of the day-to-day work. Whether through tailored developed platforms (cases 01, 02 and 04) or modest solutions such as a shared server with bibliography and reference materials (case 05), these initiatives strongly encouraged interns to create a learning path according to their specific needs and career objectives.

The survey revealed that the perception of how remote work can help in the development of teamwork was not unanimous among the trainees, with some perceiving the experience as favourable, while others perceived the online work and lack of integration as a substantial obstacle to personal development.

Finally, there is a consensus on how eWBL can hinder networking and social relationship development, as will be discussed in a specific topic (4.3). Despite the companies' attempt to propose activities and tools to instigate greater employee integration, it was not perceived as fluid, informal, and easy as it is in presential environments. This is one of the biggest challenges to be tackled in the eWBL's implementation.

4.2 Acquisition of practical experience

It was evident how much eWBL contributed to the interns' specific development in market practices, such as drawing up reports and business plans, a helpful experience in the interviewees' future careers. Often, the trainees were not only able to witness the organizations' daily routines, deal with senior professionals, and acquire substantial corporate culture but also to expand their knowledge in topics not covered during the

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
Co-funded by the European Union

academic course, for example when case 01 trainee learned about pension funds. At other times, trainees could apply the theory learned during their studies.

A positive point that the eWBL specifically enabled was the interns' participation in other regions, different business units, and strategic meetings as listeners/observers due to the easier connection that video conferencing tools allowed. This opportunity contributed to a comprehensive view of the company's processes and daily routine, an extremely favourable experience for their professional development, considering the internship is one of their first interactions with the corporate world.

In addition, many of the placements allowed the trainees to use tools, systems, and software widely used in the corporate context, as in the case of 02 and 04, who learned to operate SAP software, giving them a competitive advantage compared to other trainees.

In general, the research revealed that smart working could contribute to technical skills acquisition that demands dedicated study, reading, and concentration, while face-to-face experiences could contribute to an increase of knowledge learned mainly through observation.

4.3 Networking

As we could perceive during interviews, the eWBL still has challenges regarding trainee socialisation. The restricted or non-existent relationships outside the trainee's direct contacts compromises the informal network creation and corporate silos breaking, known as one of the greatest stimuli to innovation in companies. Moreover, as already mentioned, the lack of a stronger digital etiquette culture, with many workers joining video meetings with turned-off cameras, impaired trainees' complete integration. (Case 05)

Even with companies' proactivity and creativity in proposing integration activities, it was reported as difficult for the interns to network outside their business unit or with professionals not related to the projects they were participating in.

The fluidity and informality that physical environments bring to team building, is obviously extremely valued, In the case of remote work implementation, it is fundamental to reinforce the company's communication channels so that trainees feel more welcome.

4.4 Company/organizational culture

Along with the point mentioned in item 4.3, eWBL also greatly hindered the acquisition of corporate culture. Many interns reported difficulty in fully understanding the company's mission and objectives, processes, and etiquette due to the inability to observe the company dynamics daily.

Despite the use of online onboarding tools and processes created to overcome this challenge, it is clear that this type of knowledge transmission is easier in physical environments, and it is important to prioritize them whenever possible. The trainees who had the chance to do blended mode internships highlighted the easiness of better understanding the company's routine in detail when in the offices.

Finally, considering the interns' first professional activities and contact with the corporate world, it may be important, whenever possible, to expose them to transversal activities, multiple sectors, and strategic professionals, stimulating them to acquire wider industry knowledge and organisational culture repertoire.

5. Drivers and challenges to eWBL

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

The first pain point regarding the eWBL implementation was the cultural change required on the part of some companies and especially HEIs. Cases 01 to 05 reported the extensive work performed by career services to increase companies' and faculty members' awareness of the differences between in person and remote internships and the consequent advantages of eWBL.

Career Service has been an active player at a national and regional level in convincing teachers to validate credits from online internships and thus allow degree recognition for trainees who have undergone this training. Besides, the increase in the number of companies adopting remote working and improving their digitalisation processes, it also represents a change in labour culture in recent years. So, it is fair to say that bias against eWBL practice is quickly diminishing as it becomes more the norm.

Another point to note concerns the bureaucratic restrictions in formalising agreements and approving online internships, as mentioned in the fifth case. The evolution in HEIs' internal processes did not occur at the same pace that companies had to adapt to the pandemic restrictions, with the frequent requirement for the filling, signing, and scanning of printed forms instead of having a 100% digital and smart process.

The main disadvantage of eWBL was unanimously defined by companies, trainees, and HEIs as the difficulties in socialising and integrating interns. As mentioned in case 05, the physical distance prevented an informal network being created that could substantially contribute to the company's innovation. The intern even cites the difficulty of interacting with teams from other business units and sectors unrelated to direct projects. The same distancing also impaired the transmission of corporate culture and specific know-hows since trainees often absorb knowledge by observing their peers or the company's daily routine. The lack of informal and face-to-face interaction in the offices also hampered the leaders' monitoring of the team's environment, the trainees' progression, and agile problem-solving.

In addition, as mentioned in case 06, it is necessary to be aware of the intern's profile and aptitudes for remote work during the selection processes to ensure the correct experience and learning.
Also, it is fundamental to assess the digital culture and netiquette level on the part not only of the interns but of the entire company staff to avoid difficulties in implementing online training. As cited by trainees, episodes of meetings with teams' cameras turned off increased discomfort and feeling of displacement.

From an infrastructure point of view, many trainees and companies pointed out reliable internet connectivity, the right IT tools, and space that minimally allows work to be organized and isolated as crucial to online traineeship implementation. In addition, the company must have tools and systems that ensure sensitive data privacy and protection, cyber security, and remote access. Thus, the company's digital maturity can substantially impact the training's success.

On the process and management side, the communication channels and key people to access in case of doubts or difficulties must be very well established for the experience to run smoothly. Also, as said by an intern from case 06, the excess time spent online and in virtual meetings can overload trainees, compromising their productivity, and tutors should be attentive to that.

The need for greater involvement of tutors during remote work was the only point that appeared both as an advantage and a disadvantage. While 03 interns mentioned that the proximity to tutors made them feel more secure and facilitated the development of independence and autonomy, some companies pointed out that this increased demand generated an overload for managers, which could often compromise the viability of online internships.

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

Despite the above points, the majority of respondents have a positive opinion concerning eWBL and list several points favourable to its implementation on a large scale.

It is undeniable that remote work can help leverage interns' soft skills such as autonomy, time management, resilience, problem-solving, and organisation. Furthermore, eWBL enables trainees to participate in remote meetings with other business units and countries' teams, resulting in contact with different cultures and sectors and broadening their professional repertoire.

The isolation that smart work allows was also cited as a favourable point helping professionals to concentrate and optimise the team's time. Distance requires greater task organization and monitoring, which, when well done, promotes greater corporate efficiency. However, even some companies in favour of smart working don't see the advantage of eWBL or recommend it for trainees at the beginning of their careers, as they understand there is a lack of professional repertoire for trainees still in training. Regardless, it is important to reinforce the need for strong systems, tools, and processes standardisation for the eWBL initiative to be fruitful.

From an infrastructure point of view, the available software in the market, cloud technology, and increased 5G networks are certainly an extra stimulus to remote work. Another issue raised by 05 of 08 interns concerns innovations such as FAD and learning platforms with tailor-made and customised programs (at their own pace) that allow not only for the transmission of corporate culture, mitigating the physical distance, but also allowi trainees to develop specific skills according to the needs of their position or career plan.

Finally, as a result of the technology advancements and increase in remote work culture there is the opportunity to activate internships in other geographic locations. Thus, expanding the possibilities of career progression, as mentioned by the trainees in cases 04 and 05. The convenience, comfort of working from home, and the reduction of commuting costs were also constantly cited as favourable to eWBL. All these issues represent one of the most relevant advantages of eWBL, according to 06 of 07 interns: a better work-life balance. It is worth noting, however, that all the trainees who had the opportunity to intern in a hybrid modality said this would be the ideal situation, allowing them to take advantage of both training models.

6. Developed solutions

HEIs and companies were forced to adapt quickly to migrate internships to the online modality due to the COVID-19 restrictions, thus, ensuring the program's continuity.

There were few innovations in the processes performed by HEIs. Trainee monitoring and internship evaluations were already carried out often via video conferences (such as MS TEAMS, Google Meet, ZOOM), e-mails, or phone calls, and internship evaluation reports were already submitted via a digital platform.

The main change during the eWBL transition was the demand for digital scale-up, which required the institutions to invest in remote work software and new licenses. For monitoring interns', ZOOM and MS Teams were mainly used. Sometimes a HEIs decision and other times a result of trainees' and tutors' initiative due to the lack of a unified process. Most of the interviewed HEIs offered remote working technologies training to their employees, except in case 05, where the interviewee does not mention any course or additional guidance. Tools such as MS TEAMS, Google Meet, and Cloud sharing files were the most frequently used technologies.

In some cases (01, 02, and 04), all reporting to the same institution, career service seemed to perform a more active role and implemented the innovations below:

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

- "Info-desk" were scheduled to support the trainees who had to carry out remote placement: the staff underlined the importance of updating the attendance register, the netiquette, and the IT tools at their disposal to communicate with the parties.
- Training courses for the interns before starting the placement and taking place remotely. It included tasks to carry out in small groups to develop soft and IT skills.
- Online events with corporate partners (recruiting days, company presentations, etc.) to better explain the pros and cons of remote working and prepare trainees at best.

One point that deserves a close look is the need to migrate the internship agreement process to digital and avoid the need for printed forms in favour of digital signatures, which hinder approval processes fluidity and speed.

In companies, on the other hand, innovation was much more extensive. It is worth noting that the speed of adaptation varied greatly depending on their level of digitalisation. More structured companies with greater investment capacity, advanced technology access, and established smart-working processes (cases 01, 02, 04, and 05) went through a much smoother transition, being able to focus more on creating innovations that ensured team building, well-being, and integration. Their best practices consisted of:

- Learning Platform, allowing employees to access training courses and seminars on several professional areas (foreign languages, HR, administration, insurance, etc.)
- Company newsletter informing about ongoing and future projects, alliances, etc.

Team building activities from remote and in person, such as mock interviews for jobs of the future, paintball matches, virtual coffee breaks, virtual Christmas dinners, etc.

Another point that required investment from companies during the eWBL migration was an update on anti-virus, cybersecurity processes, and remote access software to protect sensitive data, as integrated management systems implementation such as Microsoft Dynamics and SAP.

Daily, the main tools used were MS Outlook (communication/e-mail), Slack, Excel (daily activities management), MS Teams (file management, communication, video conferencing), Dropbox (sharing of references and bibliography), Blue jeans (communication and join office meetings), Google Drive, Share point (file sharing), phone and WhatsApp (for more informal communication and integration). Whiteboard tools inside Zoom, for example, were also mentioned as relevant for information exchange and joint dynamics in remote meetings.

From the pedagogical innovation point of view, all companies had to modify their activity monitoring and team management processes to a greater or lesser extent due to remote work. The tutors generally accompany the trainees to meetings at varying intervals (daily, weekly, monthly) depending on the objectives and the plan defined in advance by the HEIs. Operationally, these activities were done by integrated management systems in some cases or shared Excel spreadsheets in less technological companies. Regarding the monitoring, the interns noted the proximity, frequency and formal follow-up from managers. This occurred as a contingency of remote work but proved to be very positive for the trainees' sense of security and confidence, allowing their later autonomy to develop. Besides this, we can cite some adjustments, such as:

- Management by objective approach instead of by processes model with strict control of hours, developing intern's autonomy.
- Definition of team objectives, instead of only individual goals. The strategy pointed out in case 06 helped to stimulate employees' integration and exchange even in a remote environment.

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
Co-funded by the European Union

- Online onboarding sessions when sanitary restrictions impeded trainees' presence at offices. When it was possible to meet physically, companies implemented an employee rotation, allowing the trainees to join the office environment in welcome sessions for up to 1 or 2 weeks and, after that, started to work remotely.
- Employees' digital upskilling needs assessment and subsequent digital training courses offered through the distance learning platform FAD, allowing tailor-made paths according to the professionals' needs and interests (case 05). The themes were diverse and covered topics like cybersecurity, foreign languages, AI, etc.

7. Long-term implications of eWBL

eWBL proved to have a very positive evaluation by most respondents, and leaves some important learnings:

- There was a substantial increase in productivity in the work environment and optimisation of the professionals' time, not only due to the environmental isolation and consequent higher concentration levels but also to the reduction in travel and commuting time.
- The end of the geographic limitations for work teams' with the aid of digital tools and video conferencing allow the involvement of professionals from different locations in activities and projects.
- In the face of the 4.0 / 5.0 economy surge, eWBL's contribution to soft skills development is extremely valued by the market: autonomy, problem-solving, resilience, critical thinking, and digital skills.
- An increase in distance learning platforms' use, allowing personalised and self-paced skilling and upskilling, should remain active in the long term.
- Obviously, all the software development and employee literacy in technologies and tools for remote working, video conferencing, remote access, and file sharing is an advancement that will bring permanent impact.
- Distance work has also contributed to the improvement and standardisation of team management and monitoring. Management by an objectives approach and the proximity with managers and tutors allowed a much smoother transition to remote work and contributed to creating a new work environment mindset.
- A general change in culture, with an ongoing decrease in prejudice towards remote work and internship, and many processes done remotely now, such as job interviews and meetings. However, the pandemic experience also showed the importance of face-to-face activities and the importance of maintaining group cohesion with onboarding processes and team-building events.
- Finally, the WBL to eWBL switch allowed companies and interns to work flexibly, conveniently, and achieve a greater work-life balance in both personal and economic terms. This new set of values will require companies and HEIs to include a good balance between the ease of face-to-face work versus the convenience of remote work in their proposals to attract the best talent and ensure the highest satisfaction of trainees.

8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

HAPHE. (2016). Harmonizing approaches to professional higher education in Europe: Definition and characteristics of professional higher education. *European Commission Life-long Learning Programme*. Available at https://www.eurashe.eu/projects/haphe/.

Perusso, A., & Wagenaar, R. (2021). The state of work-based learning development in EU higher education: learnings from the WEXHE project. *Studies in Higher Education*,47(7), 1423-1439.

WBLIC. (2016). Work-based learning as an integrated curriculum: A framework for good practice*. European Commission life-long learning programme*. Available atwww.wblic.org.uk/.

World Economic Forum (2020). The Future of Jobs Report 2020. [online] Available at: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf.

www.oecd-ilibrary.org. (n.d.). *Home.* [online] Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/88570a37-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/88570a37-en.

Glavin, C. (2019). *History of Higher Education in Italy | K12 Academics*. [online] www.k12academics.com. Available at: https://www.k12academics.com/Higher%20Education%20Worldwide/Higher%20Education%20in%20Italy/history-higher-education-italy

Todeschini, M. (n.d.). *THE UNIVERSITY IN ITALY: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CHANGING TRENDS*. [online] Available at: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/83022608.pdf

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union

Annexes

Case study report1: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_1c364c29f5cc4452bb3f9491fc8bd98c.pdf

Case study report2: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_7a78252fe35144b995bc4634282f2001.pdf

Case study report3: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_cba2ae0046bb4690a651a42137b02633.pdf

Case study report4: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_345c63872ac54084830086d8626c33e1.pdf

Case study report5: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_a80aee3e13284c83855478880a9da0d6.pdf

Case study report6: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_0ce56ae853414885ae348cfb4b09ff16.pdf

Erasmus+ Key Action 220 Cooperation Partnerships
Project code: 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000032206
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the European Union