



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

## Case Studies – netherlands (WP1)

27/01/2023

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

Prepared by: The University of Groningen



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**

## . CASE STUDY 2

<b>Name of the case</b>	<b>Dutch case study 2</b>
<b>Country(-ies)</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>
<b>Disciplinary sector</b>	<b>History and Education (soft pure)</b>
<b>Case written by</b>	<b>André Perusso</b>
<b>Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)</b>	
<p>This case described two (online) work placements offered as mandatory components of two different intercultural Master's programmes part of the Erasmus Mundus network of programmes. The work placement associated with the first programme was conducted at a transnational governmental body headquartered in Brussels. The second placement was offered at a Dutch firm dedicated to higher education-industry integration, headquartered in Amsterdam. In both internships, students worked exclusively online. At the Amsterdam-based firm, the intern was working on European research projects funded by the Erasmus+ grant, similar to the eWBL project. At the transnational body, the intern was responsible for digital communication. Tasks included writing summaries of international meetings, summits and other events on the transnational body's webpage and social media.</p>	

<b>Section</b>	<b>Answer</b>
<b>1) Organisations' background</b>	<p>The first intercultural master's programme is offered by a consortium of eight different universities, including a Dutch HEI from the north of the Netherlands. It has an interdisciplinary approach that combines courses from at least two universities of the consortium with a work placement and hands-on skills training. The programme prepares students for careers in diplomacy, international business, research, journalism, cultural management, or European administration. The second programme is jointly conducted by six HEIs. The aim is to, among others, have a sound understanding of the new contexts relevant to research and innovation in higher education. Both master's programmes are supported by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees aim to foster excellence, innovation, and internationalisation in HEIs.</p> <p>A student from the second programme did an online internship at a company from Amsterdam that specialises in large-scale research projects funded by national and international governments and delivers training for university leadership, academics and professional staff operating at the interface of higher education and industry. The company also offers consultancy to universities, industry and government to increase their external engagement. The transnational governmental body headquartered in Brussels amend, approve, or veto transnational proposals. It is essentially responsible for negotiating and adopting legislation, coordinating policies, developing and concluding international agreements, and discussing budgets.</p>
<b>2) Design, delivery and management.</b>	<p>Work placements are a mandatory component of both master's programmes. Students locate their placements on their initiative or with the support of the programme career service. Most students conduct their internships at transnational European institutions and Dutch governmental bodies. However, there are cases of internships in the private sector, as in the case of the company from Amsterdam. During COVID-19, several internship positions, especially at European governmental institutions, were not available. Most were postponed to a later time and then offered online.</p> <p>At the HEI hosting the first master's programme, the academic staff (internship supervisors) did not receive specific training on how to deal with online internships. The main change highlighted by the internship coordinator is that they offered more "contact points" between the university and interns through more frequent meetings, social gatherings and feedback sessions. This was important to follow up on students' mental well-being and instruct on online work etiquette. At the transnational body, before starting the internship, interns received an "information package" giving an overview of the departments, the key persons, the type of tasks interns should perform, software usage and privacy. This was done through PDF documents and live sessions with instructors. The working dynamic of the internship was as follows: interns were always available (online)</p>



	<p>on MS Teams. Whenever a senior employee needed assistance he or she requested the support of an intern. Once the task was completed, the same intern supported someone else. Most tasks were communicated and delivered in the MS Teams environment. That included chat, conferencing and file sharing. Emails were used mostly for external communication.</p> <p>The placement supervisor at the transnational body also held frequent feedback meetings with the interns to discuss their performance, what could be improved, and more informal conversations (socialisation). Interns often worked together with other interns on the same task. That helped with socialisation as, being peers, they could share their challenges; on work and non-work topics.</p> <p>At the Amsterdam firm, each intern received a “starting package” comprised of a laptop with a pre-installed software suite (MS Teams). They also received instructions on the specific tasks they would be doing at the Amsterdam firm. Interns were also invited to the office (when COVID-19 rules allowed) for their first day to get a general atmosphere of the work environment.</p> <p>The work day itself always started with a 15-minute meeting where supervisors and interns shared the tasks they would be working on that particular day. A similar meeting took place once a month but this one included managers and the CEO. Both meetings help to ensure that all employees (and interns) were working on the right tasks and had enough tasks to do. Otherwise, tasks would be re-distributed. Throughout the week, supervisors would reach out to interns every 2 days to check on the evolution of the work and whether the intern needed assistance. All internal interaction took place in the MS Teams environment (calls, chat, file sharing). Zoom was used for external calls.</p> <p>The Amsterdam firm cultivates a strong feedback culture. Interns received feedback from their direct supervisor every 2 weeks. Additionally, every semester there was a more formal evaluation with results being discussed one-on-one with the company’s CEO.</p> <p>During COVID-19, the Amsterdam firm also made use of social events and activities to keep employees more connected. The 15-minute daily call typically had an informal feel, with participants sharing personal aspects. Moreover, on most Fridays the whole office was invited to an online “happy hour” where participants shared drinks and played some games.</p>
<p><b>3) Difference, similarities and impact on learning outcomes</b></p>	<p>Regarding the quality of the work itself, the internship supervisor at the Amsterdam firm noticed that the online environment was not detrimental to the output produced by interns insofar as there was frequent feedback and consultation.</p> <p>The internship supervisor at the first HEI shared the opinion that most tasks can be delivered efficiently online. However, he remarked that in some areas (but especially in the organisation of events and governmental agencies), the online internship took away a significant part of the work experience. In the case of the event industry, the reason is rather obvious; events are supposed to take place mostly face-to-face. In governmental jobs, the issue relates to the “backstage” where the important discussion often takes place, something that does not happen online. He also shared that some interns completed their tasks much faster online and therefore had the feeling that their time was not being filled up completely (laissez-faire). The intern at the transnational body feels that working online is more productive than offline because you do not get interrupted. Nevertheless, there is a lack of socialisation which is detrimental to general work satisfaction.</p> <p>On the development of <i>soft skills</i>, the intern who worked for the transnational body mentioned that because all work was done online she became more proficient with digital forms of communication; verbal due to the frequent meetings she held online and written due to email sharing. However, she also remarked that the improvement was not very significant.</p> <p>Along these lines, the internship supervisor at the Amsterdam firm mentioned that soft skills are developed (one still needs to interact and cooperate with people) yet the much more controlled nature of online work impacts its development.</p>

	<p>Because of the reduced uncertainty, the emphasis is on formal verbal and written communication rather than spontaneous forms. Similarly, teamwork also becomes more formal. While this is not necessarily a problem from the Amsterdam firm's standpoint, the internship supervisor at the first HEI stressed that for jobs with a high amount of social interaction, such as the ones in Brussels, online internships undermined the development of skills related to negotiation, communication, networking and persuasion. On the other hand, there were opportunities to develop self-management skills.</p> <p>Concerning the <i>acquisition of professional experience</i>, the intern that worked in the transnational body reported that the online environment was positive for the acquisition of practical experience, especially because, without interruptions that are typical of offline work, she manages to focus all her attention on the tasks at hand. Similarly, the intern at the Amsterdam firm also mentioned being very "immersed" in the design and delivery of European research projects, ending the internship satisfied with the work experience acquired and being very beneficial to her future carrier. However, in both cases, interns missed some elements that are typical of the work they performed. In the case of the transnational body, the face-to-face meetings at the transnational governmental buildings in Brussels.</p> <p>At the Amsterdam firm, the possibility to attend conferences and events which are great for networking. The first HEI placement coordinator believes that the acquisition of practical experience is directly related to the nature of the job and how willing the organisation is to create a meaningful experience. As mentioned earlier, in some tasks (e.g research) the tasks are easily transferred. In others, like organising events, it is more difficult to adapt to the online environment. However, even in the latter, if the organisation is willing, it can recreate most dimensions of the job to the online world (e.g. organising virtual events). On that topic, the Amsterdam firm supervisor added that offering interns a variety of different experiences is helpful to increase the acquisition of practical experience. In the particular case of the Amsterdam firm, this means working in different areas of the company; projects, event organisation, communication with its partner network, etc. Finally, the Amsterdam firm supervisor also mentioned that the sense of urgency/prioritization that is typical of real-work environments is well-captured online or offline.</p> <p>Participants also reported on the influence of online work on <i>networking</i>. There is general agreement that networking skills were negatively impacted, especially with people outside of the organisation they were working. This negative impact was mainly due to the lack of time for informal conversations after the meetings or the absence of socialisation time such as coffee breaks and happy hours. As mentioned earlier, depending on the nature of the job this lack of networking might be more or less detrimental to the whole internship experience.</p> <p>Finally, on the acquisition of <i>company culture</i>, the intern working for the transnational body reports that she missed the political dimension which is highly associated with the job. That includes, above all, the backstage action such as press conference preparation, the arrival of important people, the level of formality, etc. For the Amsterdam firm intern what was particularly problematic was the fact that she was working online while most of her colleagues were in the office. This accentuated the feeling of alienation and distance from the company culture/work environment. Despite efforts from the company to minimize this distance (e.g online happy hours), it did not replace the face-to-face experience.</p>
<p><b>5) Pedagogical innovations</b></p>	<p>Pedagogical innovations to facilitate online working introduced by the organisations included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Briefing meetings</i>: every Monday the Amsterdam firm held a meeting to plan the week, go over the main work tasks with the interns and establish deadlines.</li> <li>- <i>Mentoring and feedback sessions</i>: Twice a week interns and the internship coordinator at the Amsterdam firm had online meetings where interns receive feedback and mentoring on the quality of their work and advice for improvement.</li> <li>- <i>Online happy hour</i>: the Amsterdam firm organised, once or every two weeks,</li> </ul>

	<p>online happy hours for the whole time. During happy hours' employees shared drinks and played online games.</p> <p>- <i>Welcoming package</i>: at their first day of work, interns were invited to go the Amsterdam company office to receive their IT equipment, get to know the office facilities and meet their colleagues and supervisors.</p>
<p><b>6) Technological innovations</b></p>	<p>To offer each intern a laptop with a series of programmes pre-installed to facilitate the initial set-up and onboarding. Use of a single work platform (e.g. Teams) to facilitate the workflow.</p>
<p><b>7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL</b></p>	<p>The main benefits of online work as reported by participants include better time management and flexibility with the use of one's time. That includes being able to work at convenient times and take breaks whenever necessary (e.g. to do laundry or go to the supermarket). Interns also reported being more focused and productive due to less distractions and commuting time. However, as reported by the Amsterdam firm intern, this might also lead to procrastination. The intern at the transnational body also reported feeling more tired after working online due to the lack of adequate breaks.</p> <p>On a similar dimension, online work also offers geographical flexibility. Interns and organisations can accept/offer internships in a much broader geographical range (arguably the whole world) than offline internships. This is also encompassing a financial dimension as larger European capitals (e.g. Brussels, Amsterdam) are expensive and difficult to afford for some interns.</p> <p>The main constraint of online work according to participants is the lack of social interaction. This is particularly relevant in jobs where the environment plays a decisive role in the work experience, such as government jobs in Brussels. As interns have reported, the lack of social interaction is demotivating and might develop into an unhealthy state of mind.</p> <p>The lack of socialisation has other implications. According to the Amsterdam firm intern and first HEI placement coordinator, without the social dimension it is difficult to network, especially with people outside of one's organisation. Attempts to minimize this negative impact with online social activities (e.g. happy hour) while appreciated are too artificially constructed to replace face-to-face time; it does not create further interaction outside of that artificially created environment. The first HEI supervisor used the term 'top-down'.</p> <p>Participants also offered advice on how to overcome some of the challenges of remote work. Internship supervisors should invite interns to ask questions and open avenues for contact. Similarly, interns should not be afraid to 'bother' people (text, email) when they need additional information. Make breaks to do other tasks. Organisations should also make an active effort to connect with interns, either through welcoming days, or socialisation activities but especially continuous feedback. Interns should also keep in mind that it requires more effort to connect with co-workers on remote work. Finally, organisations should give clear instructions and expectations about the nature of the internship experience. HEIs need to be more selective to avoid the so-called 'free lancer' experience where interns are hired only to perform some specific, out-of-context task.</p>