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

National REPORT – 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 GiacomoBrodolini

Univerza v Ljubljani

momentum
[educate + innovate]

FH MÜNSTER
University of Applied Sciences

Co-funded by the European Union

Introduction

The eWBL PROJECT

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 has proven to be a powerful pedagogy to foster graduate work readiness particularly because it is embedded in authentic work environments. The first-hand observation of workplace norms, routines, language, mentorship and relationship building leads to the development of highly desirable transversal skills such as advanced communication and collaboration, teamwork, self-efficacy, and networking, among others.

However, the workplace environment is changing significantly. Driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more work is now delivered remotely. With that, a new and digital form of WBL has emerged – what this project calls "eWBL". In this context, educators across the European Union (EU) need to find ways of making WBL effective in this new setting. However, how to work efficiently online and adequately replace the physical environment with a virtual one in WBL is a challenging and highly unexplored issue. There is currently very little understanding and guidance on how to conduct high-quality eWBL.

The eWBL project addresses this gap by exploring how 25 high-quality WBL providers across Europe have dealt with the pedagogical and technological challenges associated with the transition from WBL to eWBL due to COVID-19 and the solutions they have devised. The investigation will result in frameworks and replicable models, a toolkit, open educational resources, capacity-building activities, and multiplier events that will help train higher education (HE) stakeholders (lecturers, trainers, and administrative staff) 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 analyse 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 (RUG) in the Netherlands) was responsible for designing five cases.

This National Report offers an overview of the five case studies produced in the Netherlands. The document is divided into seven chapters. In chapter one we offer an overview of the WBL scenario in the Netherlands based on desk research and results from the Erasmus+ WEXHE Project (WEXHE, 2021). In chapter two we give an overview of how WBL was delivered before the COVID-19 pandemic when it was conducted completely "offline". In chapter three we explore how companies and higher education institutions (HEIs) implemented eWBL. In chapter four we look into the implications of the transition from WBL to eWBL on expected 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 encountered 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 Dutch companies, students and HEIs.

Co-funded by the European Union

Methodology

This National Report summarises the findings of the five Dutch cases. The first step to create them was to generate a list of potential cases. We spend about one month doing this, looking at results from the WEXHE project (which had already identified 12 cases of good WBL practices across the Netherlands), desk research, previous contacts from the lead researcher, and indications from RUG's career services. The preliminary list included eight potential cases. From this list, we selected five to be translated into full cases. The main selection criteria were the diversity of disciplinary areas and of HEIs providing the work placements.

After identifying the five most promising cases, we spend approximately one-month contacting stakeholders to arrange interviews. The list of stakeholders included trainers in HE, trainers in the organisations and students or alumni. The next two months were dedicated to data collection. The interview questions were developed by the consortium and essentially covered (i) how WBL was provided before COVID-19, (ii) the challenges encountered in shifting to eWBL, and (iii) the alternatives found in response. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. All interviews were conducted in English. In total 17 stakeholders were interviewed: 5 representatives of HEIs, 6 placement supervisors at the companies and 6 students or alumni that did the placement.

The data analysis adhered 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 such as soft skills, practical experience, networking and workplace culture), and (iii) the alternatives/solutions found. The result of this analytical process is summarized in the five case studies that comprise the core data of this National Report. See the five case studies in the appendix.

Co-funded by
the European Union

SAMENVATTING (Summary in DUTCH)

Work based learning (WBL) is een krachtige pedagogie om de werkbereidheid van afgestudeerden te bevorderen, met name omdat het is ingebed in authentieke werkomgevingen. Onder invloed van de COVID-19 pandemie is er echter een nieuwe en digitale vorm van WBL ontstaan – wat in dit project "eWBL" wordt genoemd. Onderwijsgevenden in de EU moeten manieren vinden om WBL effectief te maken in deze nieuwe omgeving. Momenteel bestaat er echter weinig kennis over en wordt er weinig begeleiding geboden bij het uitvoeren van eWBL van hoge kwaliteit. Het eWBL-project richt zich op deze kloof door te onderzoeken hoe 25 aanbieders van WBL van hoge kwaliteit in heel Europa (Nederland, Duitsland, Ierland, Italië en Slovenië) zijn omgegaan met de pedagogische en technologische uitdagingen die gepaard gaan met de overgang van WBL naar eWBL en de oplossingen die zij hebben gevonden. Dit nationale verslag biedt een overzicht van vijf Nederlandse casussen.

De uitvoering van eWBL vond plaats zonder een strategisch plan van bedrijven of hoger onderwijsinstellingen, omdat het idee van het project in de eerste plaats werd gevormd door de COVID-19 pandemie. Ondanks de aanvankelijke chaos, verliep de uitvoering van eWBL in alle Nederlandse casussen volgens een vergelijkbare standaard. De werkweek begon altijd met een "kick-off" vergadering om de taken uit te leggen en de agenda's voor de week op elkaar af te stemmen. Tussentijdse vergaderingen vonden soms doordeweeks plaats om zo het werk van de stagiairs na te lopen en feedback te geven. Stagiairs hadden voortdurend toegang tot samenwerkingsplatforms zoals chat, e-mail, bestandsuitwisseling of videoconferenties. Zo hielden zij gemakkelijk contact met hun collega's. Terwijl de werktijden binnen de norm van 8u-17u bleven, hadden de stagiairs de vrijheid om hun werkschema in te delen volgens hun specifieke behoeften.

De overgang van WBL naar eWBL heeft verschillende gevolgen gehad voor de leerresultaten. Het meer onafhankelijke, computer gebaseerd werk bevordert geschreven communicatie, zelfredzaamheid en tijdmanagementvaardigheden. Vaardigheden die afhankelijk zijn van sociale interactie werden echter nauwelijks ontwikkeld. Deze omvatten teamwerk, netwerken, spreken in het openbaar en overtuigingskracht. Naast soft skills, heeft WBL als grootste voordeel dat het praktische ervaring oplevert. Ondanks het feit dat ze de stages vanuit huis deden, beoordeelden de stagiairs de stage als relevant en nuttig voor hun carrière. Ze hebben de reguliere werkzaamheden, het aannemen van verantwoordelijkheden en het volgen van een werkschema. Dit gevoel werd voornamelijk benadrukt in analytische functies die weinig sociale interactie vergden. Echter, voor posities die meer sociale interactie vereisen, gaven online stages enkel een gedeelte van de werkelijkheid van de baan weer. Het gebrek aan sociaal contact reduceert ook netwerkmogelijkheden. Niettemin bevestigden stagairs dat het mogelijk was een netwerk op te bouwen met mensen die dichter bij hen werken zoals andere stagiaires of directe begeleiders.

Uit de resultaten van de casestudies blijkt dat de voornaamste drijfveer voor eWBL flexibiliteit is. Dit omvat zowel de geografische factoren (werken in verschillende steden of zelfs landen) als het tijdsbeheer (werkschema aanpassen aan iemands voorkeuren). Een andere drijfveer is productiviteit. Het elimineren van de reistijd en de afleidingen die typisch zijn voor het kantoorleven, verhoogt de werkoutput aanzienlijk. Thuiswerken brengt echter ook moeilijkheden met zich mee. Het meest relevante probleem is het gebrek aan sociaal contact. Stagiairs minder gemotiveerd om te werken, de routine wordt te repetitief, de mogelijkheden voor netwerken en teamwerk worden beperkt en ze missen vaak de bedrijfscultuur.

Zich bewust zijnde van de uitdagingen van online werk, hebben bedrijven en hoger onderwijsinstellingen verschillende alternatieven ontwikkeld om zo deze problemen te omzeilen. Twee elementen bijzonder relevant gebleken: het creëren van open communicatiekanalen tussen stagiairs, bedrijven en hoger onderwijsinstellingen, alsook het aanbieden van voortdurende feedback. Interessant is dat uit de gegevens blijkt dat een populair alternatief om het probleem van de sociale afstand te minimaliseren - online sociale

Co-funded by the European Union

activiteiten zoals spelletjes en happy hours - minder voordelen oplevert.

Wat de impact op lange termijn betreft, wijst alles erop dat we evolueren naar een hybride vorm van WBL. De productiviteits- en flexibiliteitsvoordelen van werk op afstand zijn te relevant om over het hoofd te zien. Ook is er een algemeen erkend tekort aan sociaal contact dat momenteel niet kan worden omzeild met hulpmiddelen zoals virtuele koffiepauzes. Een aantal werkuren op kantoor besteden is dus onmisbaar. Wat precies een goede balans tussen online en face-to-face tijd blijft echter vooralsnog een open kwestie.

Co-funded by
the European Union

Table of Contents

Co-funded by the European Union

1. Background: WBL in the Netherlands

The dramatic changes in 21st-century work conditions caused by the globalisation and the digitalisation phenomenon lead Dutch HE policymakers concerned with the future of Dutch graduates. A call for a stronger alignment between education and practice has become a trend, leading to increased incorporation of WBL practices into Dutch HE (OECD, 2017).

Work placements (also called internships), which are the most popular form of WBL design (Perusso and Wagenaar, 2021), have become compulsory in most Dutch HE programmes, with an adequate alignment between the university and regional employers regulated through national legislation. In universities of applied sciences, work placements are very common. In research-based universities, they are a relatively new phenomenon yet one that is increasingly finding its way into the curricula (Rijksoverheid, 2015).

Most WBL activities at Dutch HEIs concentrate on the so-called 'applied' disciplinary areas like business and engineering. This is mainly because these faculties have the closest and long-standing collaboration with employers. 'Pure' disciplines (e.g. natural sciences and humanities) focus less on work integration. However, in recent years, universities are increasingly trying to smoothen the transition to the labour market and strive to deliver readily employable graduates also in the 'pure' areas. Despite this development, there is still some reluctance within research universities to incorporate WBL in the curricula, especially out of scepticism towards a 'market orientation' and the fear of compromising academic integrity (Van Velzen and van der Klink, 2014).

Regarding the design and delivery of WBL in Dutch HEIs, the Erasmus+ project WEXHE (2020) clustered it into three main categories:

i) *Traditional work placement*: sometimes called internships, in this mode of delivery students work for around 3 to 6 months in a company or organization. At the providers' facilities, students perform various activities related to their disciplinary area. Good placements are marked by the strong support of the organization where interns perform relevant tasks and have the opportunity to work on their personal development through feedback and mentoring instruments. In this form of WBL, it is common that the intern himself apply for his/her placement position.

ii) *Placement programmes*: these programmes offer a higher level of integration between theory and practice. There, the HEI helps students develop professionally relevant competencies before the start of the placement, assists them with finding the placement (or have a pre-establish agreement with guaranteed positions), and coordinates the content of the placement and the feedback mechanisms with the placement provider.

iii) *Project-based learning*: students spend time working for a company, like in the traditional work placement, but instead of fulfilling daily tasks, they work on specific, predefined projects. The advantage of this modality is that it is easier to link the theory (learned at the HEI) and practice (performed at the company) since project activities can closely match the learning outcomes of the module. This type of WBL is very common in the 'applied' disciplinary area (e.g business and engineering).

Regarding the impact and satisfaction with WBL in Dutch HE, the current situation looks positive. Organizations have demonstrated a clear propensity to employ students following a work placement. Students are also generally satisfied with their work placements, albeit mostly with the work placement itself and less with the supervision and preparation offered by their educational institutes (WEXHE, 2020). HEIs are expected

Co-funded by the European Union

to improve these practices, especially since they are under increased scrutiny by prospective students concerning their labour market orientation efforts.

In summary, the WBL context in the Netherlands is favourable. The government has put in place stimulating and facilitating measures, students value practice-oriented education more and more, businesses have adopted a proactive attitude, and HEIs have become more aware of the importance of WBL. WBL practices in universities of applied sciences are well developed with a tradition of over 40 years in which the workplace is used as a learning environment. Similarly, despite some resistance, significant efforts were made in the last 25 years by research universities to strengthen the link between theory and practice and to prepare students for the world of work (WEXHE, 2020). Overall, WBL is increasingly becoming an integral and indispensable part of Dutch HE.

2. WBL delivery pre-COVID-19

The following paragraphs describe how WBL was delivered before the COVID-19 crisis in the five Dutch cases. Activities were conducted entirely offline.

All five cases represent traditional work placements as described by the WEXHE taxonomy (see Chapter 1). Interns worked on the company premises under the supervision of a senior employee. In most cases, the supervisor was responsible for assigning interns with work tasks and providing assessments, mentoring and feedback (e.g cases 1 and 2). In other cases (e.g. case 3), the person doing the assessment and feedback was someone different from the one giving the work tasks. Moreover, before COVID-19, interns were officially welcomed into the organisation, received instruction from a supervisor and were officially introduced to senior members of the organisation and their peers.

From the HEIs side, in all five cases, students met with their placement supervisor regularly to discuss the progress of the internship and receive feedback. At the end of the internship, students had to write a placement report which was used as the main form of assessment. In cases 2 and 4, the work placement was also connected with students' bachelor's and/or master's thesis. Additionally, the case 4 placement was more structured than the other cases, especially from the HE perspective. It was divided into four stages. To complete each stage students must deliver assignments which are preceded by feedback sessions based on specific rubrics. Between stages, students participate in several forms of reflection and feedback that check on student improvements based on what was discussed in each of the four assignments.

3. eWBL implementation

In all five cases, placements were moved to the online environment without a pre-established strategic plan from companies or HEIs. That means placement supervisors and other employees had to adapt to online work very suddenly and follow a trial and error approach. The guidance that placement supervisors received from central management, both at companies and HEIs, referred mostly to COVID-19 regulations and not on how to organise the placement from a didactical perspective. Some organisations gave interns and supervisors specific directives on how to install software and establish a safe internet connection. Some interns (e.g cases 2 and 5) received company laptops with a pre-installed software suite.

At first, HEIs were busy arranging placement positions for all students, especially for programmes where internships are mandatory (e.g case 2 and 4). This was the most pressing issue since many placement positions were no longer being offered due to COVID-19 (e.g. case 2). Once the situation became more controlled, HEIs started to invest more time in creating feedback and mentoring sessions and organising

Co-funded by the European Union

socialisation events such as virtual happy hours. As the placement coordinator from case 2 put it, the main responsibility of HEIs was to offer students several 'contact points'. With the transition from offline to online, such contact points took place mostly via video conference. These meetings have also become more frequent than in 'offline' times to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction. The mental well-being of students was a major concern for all HEIs portrayed in the Dutch case studies.

From the company side, eWBL delivery was surprisingly similar in all five cases. It typically went as follows. On the first day of work, interns received IT instructions, installed software or received laptops with the pre-installed software. Some companies also invited interns for an 'onboarding' session face-to-face at the company's premises. There, interns were formally presented to their colleagues, supervisors and fellow interns.

The working week itself always started with a brief (15 to 45 min) 'kick-off' meeting with the working team to explain and share tasks and coordinate the calendars for the week. This meeting typically had an informal tone, used also as a form of socialisation. In some of the cases (e.g cases 2 and 5), additional meetings took place on Wednesdays or Thursdays to follow up on interns' work schedules and offer them feedback. In addition to weekly meetings, larger meetings were often held once a month with the participation of a large number of employees, including senior management.

In addition to these pre-scheduled meetings, interns had continuous access to their colleagues and supervisors through work-sharing platforms such as MS Teams (in most cases) or Google workspace. The level of interaction varied according to specific needs but it always included chat, e-mail, file sharing and video conferencing. Typically, e-mail was more commonly used for external communication and chat for internal. Similarly, built-in video conferencing tools (e.g. Google meet) were used for internal communication while Zoom was prefered for external. In most cases, interns were available (online) all the time via the online work platforms. However, this availability does not mean that they were being constantly interrupted. Depending on the nature of the task, interns worked one or more full days completely independently. Similarly, while working hours remained within the traditional timeframe (8h-17h) interns had the freedom to organise their work schedule according to their specific professional and personal needs. For instance, they could start working late if they felt it was more productive (e.g. 10 AM), leave for 1-2 hours in the middle of the afternoon to solve personal issues or do some home tasks (cooking, cleaning, etc).

In all five cases, companies often organised social activities for employees and interns. These activities varied from company to company but generally included coffee breaks, happy hours, wine or beer tasting, playing online games or simply chatting. In some cases, like cases 1 and 2, drinks and snacks were sent by the company via post. Once COVID-19 rules were less strict, some companies encouraged employees to have face-to-face meetings in open spaces or simply go for walks. HEIs also organised similar events for their interns' community. In addition to these activities organised by the companies, interns often organised their own happy hours.

Lastly, regarding the level of face-to-face interaction, most work placements were delivered fully online during the peak of COVID-19. As the situation improved, some companies allowed employees to go to the office once or twice a week, characterising a hybrid environment. Examples include cases 1, 2 and 4. In the other cases, placements were delivered entirely online.

4. Impact of eWBL on learning outcomes

Generally speaking, eWBL was not detrimental to the output produced by interns. Several interns (and their

Co-funded by the European Union

supervisors) said they were more productive online as they were more focused on the task at hand and rarely interrupted. Moreover, because they did not have to commute, they often worked long hours. Also, the flexibility offered by online work allowed interns to work on hours they felt more productive. The productivity was enhanced even further when supervisors gave interns clear instructions and were available for feedback and consultation.

However, the case studies revealed that productivity gain comes with setbacks. The clearest one, mentioned by all participants — HE, companies and interns alike — was the lack of social interaction. While less socialisation did not necessarily lower the quality of the work output, it decreased the general satisfaction of students with their internship experience. Moreover, as will be discussed further, the lack of socialisation impacted critical aspects of WBL such as networking and the development of soft skills. Another setback of eWBL on work quality is that it might lead to procrastination, where students spent hours browsing the internet before and between tasks. Finally, in some cases (e.g. case 2), the productivity gain combined with the flexibility of the online environment gave interns the feeling that their time was not being filled up completely, and the internship was a 'laissez-faire' activity. In summary, the transition from WBL to eWBL produced several impacts on the learning outcomes typically associated with WBL.

4.1 Soft-skills development

One of the best-documented benefits of WBL is the development of soft skills (Perusso and Wagenaar, 2021). Overall, the data from the cases suggest that online WBL fosters the development of soft skills yet a different and more restricted skill set than offline WBL. Online placements are particularly strong in the development of written communication. Interns write better e-mails, reports and memos since most online communication is written. The recurring online meetings (more frequent than offline given the flexibility of remote work) also help to develop interns' verbal communication. However, as the internship supervisor from case 2 pointed out since online meetings are more controlled than face-to-face ones, verbal communication skills that interns acquire tend to be less spontaneous and more structured. Similarly, eWBL develops teamwork skills yet, just like communication, in a different way than offline. As the case 5 placement manager stressed, online teamwork is more 'one-sided' than offline. That is, it is originated by one person requesting help from another person with a particular problem rather than a collective, highly collaborative activity. Data from the cases also show that interns working online improved their time management skills and self-regulation capabilities. This is expected given that interns work much more independently online.

Inversely, data shows that soft skills that depend on close social interaction were poorly developed or not developed at all, given that socialization among interns and between interns and company staff is highly restricted in online work. Examples given by participants include networking, persuasion and public speaking. Despite attempts to promote it (e.g. online happy hours), interviewees believe that online work alone is insufficient to develop personal-level relationships and, consequently, acquire the skills and attitudes typically associated with this close contact.

Finally, an additional limitation of eWBL mentioned by more than one placement supervisor is that soft skills development can be severely undermined if the intern is the only one working online. In this circumstance, communication and teamwork skills are negatively influenced as the intern does not capture the relevant part of the teamwork and communication activity that is taking part when he or she is not physically there.

4.2 Acquisition of practical experience

Next to soft skills, WBL's main benefit includes the gaining of practical knowledge complementing the theoretical knowledge acquired in the university classroom (Jackson, 2015). The Dutch cases show that the

Co-funded by the European Union

transition to eWBL had significant implications for the level of practical knowledge interns acquired, yet this level differed according to the type of job performed.

The implication of eWBL was less severe in areas where work is typically performed in front of a computer with low social interaction. Examples from the cases include research work (case 2), data analysis (case 4), policy advisory (case 1) and digital communication (case 2). In these areas, eWBL allowed interns to contrast theory with practice to have a better understanding of how theory applies to the specific context. Moreover, interns said that the work placement was highly relevant and beneficial to their careers. I also allowed students to acquire the habit of performing regular work, assuming responsibilities, being a part of an organisation, and following a work schedule; even though they were doing it from home.

However, data indicates that in professional areas where social interaction is a determinant component of the job, eWBL provided only a partial portrayal of the reality of the profession. That was especially detrimental to the hospitality industry (as portrayed in case 5) and governmental jobs (case 2). In the former, the problem was that online work simply could not replace the contact with customers which is so characteristic of the hospitality sector. To circumvent this problem, interns performed administrative tasks such as budgeting and support human resource management. While relevant, this type of work was not at the core of the profession. In the latter, the problem was not associated with the delivery of the tasks themselves (policy dissemination) but with the overall work environment. As remarked by participants, a significant part of the experience of working for a transnational governmental institution is being in the (physical) place where decisions are made (e.g. Brussels), witnessing the policy negotiation process and how the authorities come to an agreement. Something similar happened at the national level in case 1. Even outside governmental jobs, the work environment plays a role. In the venture capital company from case 4, for instance, deals are negotiated during presentations, lunch meetings or similar events, not online. These are elements that interns only grasp if they are physically present.

In this context, hybrid work emerged as the potential solution. Whenever important meetings take place, interns can attend face-to-face. Alternatives also incorporate one or two days a week in the office and three days remote.

4.3 Networking

It is consensus among interviewees that networking is negatively impacted by online work, being especially problematic when networking with people outside of the organisation. As mentioned earlier, the lack of socialisation time (during coffee breaks, after meetings and during events) significantly reduced networking opportunities. Additionally, because online work often relies more upon written than verbal communication, people had difficulties remembering names and associating those names with the person ‘behind the screen’. In other words, even if one communicates with a person regularly, it does not mean that one has established a ‘network’ with this person.

But despite the limited opportunities, interns (e.g. case 3), affirmed they can still build a network with people working closer to them, such as other interns or direct supervisors. It was also mentioned that students have become more active in their networking activities. They learned to reach out to people through different means and to cultivate these relationships in the absence of the physical environment. Similarly, an intern from case 4 suggested that, if persons working online have the chance to meet face-to-face one or more times the relationship can be easily strengthened; it is not like starting from scratch. Lastly, if used well, the online environment might create opportunities to network with people geographically distant.

Co-funded by the European Union

4.4 Company/organizational culture

Another important learning outcome of WBL is the acquisition of organisational and work 'culture'. That includes first-hand observation of workplace norms, routines and language of a given company and industry (Gray, 2001; Jackson, 2015). Similar to the acquisition of practical experience discussed earlier, the impact of eWBL on work culture acquisition differs from sector to sector. In areas where face-to-face interaction is a relevant part of the job (e.g. hospitality) or where decisions are met collectively (e.g. governmental areas) online work did not offer the chance to fully acquire the workplace culture. Similarly, in companies with a highly informal culture, where relevant decisions are often made during lunch or at coffee breaks (e.g case 4), the lack of face-to-face interaction undermined the absorption of this culture.

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, positive skills and attitudes that are typically associated with an everyday work routine such as discipline, independent problem-solving and self-efficacy were still highly present during online placements. Interns felt like they had responsibilities, a working routine, urgent tasks and deadlines to meet. However, some nuanced aspects of this so-called 'work routine' were missed, including leaving home, commuting, getting properly dressed, and meeting colleagues after work. Online meetings were particularly relevant to helping interns to capture the company culture, including the level of formality, language and communication style. Onboarding events and socialisation activities helped as well, nevertheless, some of these activities (e.g. online happy hour) were considered by many participants to be too artificially constructed to offer a valid picture of the company culture.

5. Drivers and challenges to eWBL

Data from the five Dutch cases show a strong consensus on what are the main drivers (benefits) and the challenges (difficulties) in eWBL.

5.1 Drivers

The main benefits are threefold. The first is the increased flexibility, including (i) where one does the internship (e.g. in a different city from where you study), (ii) how one organises the day (e.g start early or work until late), and (iii) how easy it is to reach out to people who are physically distant. The geographic flexibility is particularly relevant for jobs located in major European capitals where it is expensive to live. If the intern can work from somewhere cheaper, this opens up opportunities for students who otherwise could not have afforded to do the placement. Additionally, by being able to manage your working hours, one can adjust their work schedule to times where one is most productive; a time that is different from person to person. Finally, online work allows interns to participate in meetings in different cities or even countries. Probably if these meetings were face-to-face, interns would not be able to join. The second benefit is that one spends less time commuting. The saved time can be employed in additional working time or in performing some other activity that would otherwise consume working time. Either way, one becomes more productive. The third is that working from home typically entails fewer distractions, which also leads to an increase in productivity. It also fosters relevant soft skills associated with independent work such as time management, independent thinking, initiative, and self-regulation.

5.2 Challenges

The gains in flexibility, mobility, and capacity to focus come with equivalent problems. Data from the cases indicates that the most relevant of these problems is reduced social interaction. The are multiple consequences of the meagre socialisation. Interns feel less motivated to work and/or enjoy their work

Co-funded by the European Union

placements less. In more extreme cases, this lack of motivation might lead to serious mental issues (e.g. anxiety, depression, etc.). Similarly, participants reported that spending too much time at home gives the impression that the work is repetitive and the daily routine never changes. Others mentioned an involuntary merge between working and personal time. All these factors ultimately foster the aforementioned feelings of dissatisfaction with the work placement experience.

Moreover, results from the cases revealed interns' difficulties in absorbing the company/workplace culture. As mentioned earlier, this is particularly problematic in industries and sectors where social interaction is a key component of the job. Participants also had difficulties in the development of soft skills connected to creativity and teamwork because the absence of face-to-face time leads interns to overemphasise their own roles at the expense of collaborative and creative thinking. eWBL seems also to undermine networking, especially with persons outside of the organisation. Finally, the lack of physical proximity makes it difficult for supervisors to know what interns are doing. This is problematic not only because interns might waste time working on the wrong tasks but also because supervisors have difficulties in giving feedback and mentoring to interns.

5.3 Alternatives

Aware of the challenges of eWBL, companies and HEIs designed several alternatives to circumvent or minimize these issues. The next section will give details of these alternatives, yet two elements seem particularly relevant: creating open channels of communication and offering continuous feedback. On the former, interns should be encouraged to communicate with their supervisors and supervisors should create multiple channels for interns to do so; this includes chat, email, scheduled meetings but also phone calls. Similarly, interns should not be afraid of contacting supervisors when they have important questions. On the latter, the case studies show that, due to the physical distance, feedback becomes increasingly important in online work, both from the company and HEI side. This should be translated into more frequent feedback sessions, once a week at least. Also, HEIs should strive to build a network of interns and give opportunities for them to share insights. Moreover, interns working online need more detailed instructions and continuous follow-up on these instructions to avoid misunderstandings.

Interestingly, data from the cases show that a popular alternative to minimize the social distance issue – online socialisation activities like games and happy hours — bring few benefits. While appreciated, these efforts are too artificially constructed to replace face-to-face time. As participants have put it, because they are too 'top-down', they do not motivate interaction outside of that artificially created environment. Additionally, these activities seem to simply be less enjoyable than face-to-face interaction, doing little to alleviate the feeling of alienation.

6. Developed solutions

A significant part of the eWBL project is dedicated to identifying and disseminating relevant pedagogical and technological innovations that help educators to deliver high-quality eWBL. To that, the five Dutch cases produced significant insights. These insights can be divided into (a) pedagogical solutions developed at (i) company and (ii) HE and (b) technological solutions.

6.1 pedagogical solutions

6.1.1 At the company level

The most common pedagogical innovation introduced by companies (extant in all cases) is the *weekly briefing*

Co-funded by the European Union

meeting, taking place mostly on Mondays in the morning. It is used not only to inform interns of their tasks for the week but also to meet colleagues and supervisors (networking) as well as for socialisation purposes; meetings often started with a "how was your week" conversation. It is not very long (15-30min) and includes a small number of participants.

Another very common pedagogical practice is *feedback and mentoring meetings*. These are often one-on-one meetings between the intern and placement supervisor. As the name says, it is used to give feedback to interns and as an instrument for formal assessment. The feedback meetings typically take place once a week. Interns and supervisors alike believe this is a relevant moment to check on the intern's mental health, motivation and general satisfaction with (remote) work.

Less frequent but also relevant is the *interns' meeting*. It works as both a feedback and socialisation event where all interns from a given department or firm met to share their experiences, offer advice to one another or simply chat. This meeting can be initially set up by the company or the HEI but later interns can take over its organisation. Instant communication software such as WhatsApp is useful to transform these meetings into a form of community.

The last pedagogical innovation related to meetings was introduced in case study 1 and is called *meeting briefings*. Before every important online meeting, the placement supervisor spent 10-15mins explaining to interns the purpose of the given meeting, who is participating and what attitude and behaviour is expected from interns. That encourages interns to have more active participation in video conferences.

Beyond meetings, *onboarding sessions* were a popular pedagogical innovation. There, interns are invited to the company premises and are 'welcomed' by colleagues and supervisors. They also visit the company premises, and receive general instructions, and IT equipment. This welcoming day serves various purposes. It facilitates later communication between employees and interns as people know the 'face behind the screen'. It also facilitates the setting up of IT equipment and the dissemination of work norms, routines and culture; it gives interns the feeling that they are working for a "real" organisation.

A relevant innovation mentioned in different cases but introduced by the venture capital company in case 4 as a policy is the so-called *low barrier approach*. The company actively cultivates a culture of low communication barriers between interns and supervisors. That means interns should be able to easily reach supervisors by phone or instant messaging and are encouraged to contact supervisors whenever relevant questions emerge.

During COVID-19, the company in case 3 introduced the pedagogical innovation where interns always *work in pairs*, sharing similar or the same tasks. According to participants, this alleviates the feeling of isolation associated with home officing and allows interns to have someone whom they can contact daily at a personal level (e.g. on WhatsApp). Similar variants of this approach comprise the introduction of *work buddies* (case 2). The difference here is that the buddy is not an intern but a junior employee. Because of his/her work experience and age proximity, the buddy not only helps interns with their tasks but can also alleviate feelings of isolation.

Lastly, several company innovations can be clustered into socialisation activities. The most common is the *online happy hour* where participants share drinks, play games and chat. To make it more appealing to participants, some companies send employees a basket of goods containing drinks and snacks to be consumed during the event. The frequency and type of participants that attend such events vary. Some companies do it weekly, others monthly. Some meetings include various corporate levels. Others are reserved just for people working closer together (department-level). A variant of online happy hour is the so-called

Co-funded by the European Union

digital lunch. Employees agree to have lunch 'together' where they can get to know each other better, socialise and share work experiences. In addition to virtual sessions, some companies, especially during COVID-19, fostered socialisation via group walks and similar open-air activities. In a post-COVID-19 scenario, such activities could be used as a means to gather employees that work entirely or mostly online together and foster socialisation among them by doing jointly outdoor activities.

6.1.2 At the HE level

Data from the Dutch cases suggests that Dutch HEIs have been less innovative than companies when it comes to eWBL pedagogical innovation. As mentioned before, HEIs spent a significant amount of time arranging placement positions since many vacancies were cancelled due to COVID-19. Once the situation became more controlled, HEIs main concern was to keep track of interns' mental health and general well-being generated by the long period of isolation. This monitoring was achieved mainly through more recurrent than usual *feedback sessions*. Also, internship supervisors at HE became more accessible for informal conversation when the situation required. HEIs also organised meetings with different interns, similar to the interns' meeting described in item 6.1.1. Again, the purpose was for interns to share their experiences and learn from one another.

The most pedagogically innovative HEI is the one from case 4. There, work placements are divided into *four stages*. To conclude each stage, students have to deliver assignments. Students receive formative feedback on the draft version of each assignment based on specific rubrics. Individual feedback is also given between assignments in the form of Q&A sessions and individual mentoring where work but also personal matters are discussed. Finally, students are encouraged to share their feedback outcomes with other students and discuss the problems they face and how they have solved them.

6.2 Technological solutions

Surprisingly, there was no major technological innovation developed for the exclusive purpose of eWBL. What happened, in all five cases, was simply a more intensive use of already existing software. For instance, the company portrayed in case 2 already used MS Teams as a virtual workspace. As a consequence of COVID-19, they expanded their licence and used Teams as their main work environment. This included instant messaging, email, voice calls, virtual conference and file sharing.

Most companies transferred all their work activity to one platform; either Google Workspace or MS Teams. Other software was also used for more specific purposes; WhatsApp for more informal conversation and socialisation (groups) and Zoom for (mainly external) video conferencing.

It was also interesting to learn that the technological transition in the Netherlands was smooth. Participants did not report any relevant difficulty with the installation and later use of collaborative work platforms. The process was made easier by companies who pre-installed all software on the intern's personal computer or simply offered interns a company laptop with all the programs already installed. Regarding IT infrastructure, the Dutch cases did not report any significant issue with internet connection.

7. Long-term implications of eWBL

Considering the important gains in productivity and flexibility associated with remote work (as discussed in section 5), results from the Dutch cases indicate that a significant part of interns' work will remain online. This

Co-funded by the European Union

is especially true for placements where analytical tasks dominate. However, face-to-face contact is critical for the acquisition of practical experience, company culture and networking. It also enhances teamwork and other collaborative skills. Consequently, data indicates that interns should go to the office a few days a week (preferably) or a month. Interns shall use these days at the office to perform the type of activities that do not work as well remotely. This includes giving and receiving feedback from supervisors, performing collaborative work (e.g. brainstorming sessions), working on problems that require detailed instructions, and attending important events, meetings and socialisation activities, among others.

In addition to the general advantages of eWBL reported in section 5, participants stressed a few other long-term implications of remote internships. Feedback sessions between students and placement supervisors at HEIs will likely remain online. Similarly, most business meetings will continue to be delivered online, especially when external parties are involved. Remote placements also allow companies to recruit interns from a much broader geographical area. This is an additional incentive for companies to keep significant parts of work placements online. For interns, such flexibility can be also beneficial as it will be easier to combine university commitments (e.g. exams, thesis writing, travel) with the internship activities together with lowering financial costs which sometimes prevent interns from choosing a placement in expensive European capitals.

In summary, all indicate that we will see hybrid forms of work placements in the future. The productivity and flexibility gains of remote work are too relevant to be overlooked, both to interns, companies and HEIs. Likewise, there is a well-recognised issue of socialisation that, at the present moment, cannot be circumvented with online tools such as virtual coffee breaks. Therefore, some in-office time is indispensable. What remains open is the exact balance between online and face-to-face time. It seems that it depends on the type of job performed. Highly analytical jobs might require fewer office visits (once every two weeks?). Activities where the physical environment plays a central role - either due to contact with clients or because decisions are made dominantly face-to-face - will probably require more office time (twice a week?). Time will tell.

As for technological matters, there seem not to be significant implications arriving from the WBL to eWBL transition. The technology already exists and seems to work well, at least in the Netherlands where internet connection is widespread and reliable. Moreover, interns and employers seem to have adapted well to the virtual workspaces that are offered by well-known providers such as Microsoft and Google. Perhaps in the future technology will allow for a deeper level of virtual interaction to solve the socialisation problem, yet that is difficult to predict.

References

HAPHE. (2016). Harmonising 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/.

Jackson, D. (2015). Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: Barriers and best practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(2), 350–367.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A method sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

OECD (2017). *OECD Employment Outlook 2017*. Retrieved October 4, 2017, from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/empl_outlook-2017-en

Co-funded by the European Union

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.

Rijksoverheid (2015). *Cijfermatige achtergrondinformatie ten behoeve van Slotconferentie HO-tour*. Retrieved October 1, 2017 from: https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/publicaties/2015/02/25/cijfermatige-achtergrondinformatie-voor-slotconferentie-ho-tour/slotconferentie-feiten-en-cijfers.pdf

van Velzen, C., & van der Klink, M. (2014). Developing internships in the Netherlands: new concepts, new roles, new challenges. In *Practical Knowledge in Teacher Education* (pp. 202-216). Routledge.

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

WEXHE (2020). Integrating entrepreneurship and work experience in higher education: National Report of the Netherlands. *Erasmus+ Programme of the European Commission*. Available at www.wexhe.eu

Co-funded by
the European Union

Annexes

Case study report1: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_df61908c3af8441294bf871e1f7eba62.pdf

Case study report2: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_e1b1d534da0f4070aac767ff4b29b05d.pdf

Case study report3: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_87be4a5615914a1b880374da51cd048a.pdf

Case study report4: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_9913cf9015a242f0b2a97cfcf579a941.pdf

Case study report5: https://www.ewbl-project.com/_files/ugd/6366ae_2ed87458fabb4ff08146ad535f77d914.pdf