



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

CASE STUDIES – GERMANY (WP1)

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

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CASE STUDY REPORT 5

Organisation(s)	Energy provider, University of Applied Sciences
Country(-ies)	Germany
Disciplinary sector	Business studies
Case written by	Alina Serafiniak
Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)	
<p>This case describes the online work placement offered for a Dual Degree Bachelor of Business Studies at a University of Applied Sciences. Thereby, the student fulfilled an apprenticeship at an energy provider, which included work in different departments such as controlling and finance, marketing, HR etc.. The dual degree program consists of a switch between work and study blocks for the student, each with a period of three months. The whole program was delivered one year online. The case demonstrates the different pedagogical tools used by the University of Applied Sciences and the student's participation in the online work placement, such as weekly meetings, mentoring, presentations, and feedback.</p> <p>The case also examines the drivers and barriers of eWBL, the learning implications of eWBL, and the recommendations given by case participants for the future of eWBL.</p>	

Section	Answer
1) Organisation's background	<p>The University of Applied Sciences is a public university. The dual study program of business studies is a bachelor's program, which the participating companies privately fund. Students participate in this program to study for the Bachelor's while completing an apprenticeship at a partner organisation. There is a switch between studying and working and the company every three months.</p> <p>The company is a regional energy provider in Germany. The company runs its power plants and employs around 2,000 people. During the apprenticeship, the students work and get to know different business areas like controlling and finance, marketing, HR, sales, and many more.</p> <p>The student studied from 2017 to 2021, including one year of online studies and work.</p>
2) Design, delivery, and management.	<p>The student works in different departments of the company (as mentioned in 1.). At the company, Microsoft teams was used for meetings and communication between colleagues. At the university, Zoom was used for the lectures.</p> <p>Due to the governmental regulations in Germany, companies and universities were forced to move work and lectures online within one week. Accordingly, the governmental regulations created the need for a fast switch from in-person to online in the workplace and the universities. At the university, the lecturers had to present their online concept to the principal and then adapt it</p>

	<p>within one week. Also, at the company, the learning materials for the students and interns had to be adapted to the online environment.</p> <p>The company equipped all its employees with the necessary hardware and software before Covid. The laptops had an integrated camera and a headset, which enabled the employees and the student to work online and attend the online lectures of the university. At the university, the lecturers were allowed to order hardware for their homes to be well equipped for working from home and the online teaching situation. Later, the university rooms were equipped with streaming cameras and software to allow a hybrid teaching format.</p> <p>The supervision of the students at work took place in a regular meeting, where the latest events were discussed and communicated. Especially in the beginning, the frequency of meetings increased from once a month or once a week to daily meetings with the students to update each other. In terms of giving feedback at work or university, there is no change and the primary focus being on the results rather than other aspects.</p> <p>The assessment and evaluation for the students changed at the university as traditional exams were not allowed anymore. Accordingly, many lecturers introduced oral exams, presentations, or written papers as a new way of examination. Thereby, students had the opportunity to participate in an oral trial exam to get to know the new examination format.</p> <p>The staff at the university had regular Covid calls where questions were answered, and updates on the current situation were provided. Further, training on how to work with digital tools was provided, and a Zoom license for all teachers was purchased. The staff at the company got on-the-job training on working online, and continuous software updates improved the technological infrastructure and the systems.</p>
<p>3) Difference and similarities</p>	<p>Due to increasing self-study and more independent learning, virtual working requires a higher understanding of the topic and more discipline and organisation. Accordingly, this was more exhausting for the students than studying on-site.</p> <p>Lack of personal contact with colleagues and other students led to fewer questions being asked at work. Further, there were fewer opportunities to build personal relationships for the students.</p> <p>At the university, the online learning environment created the same teaching possibilities as the on-site learning environment. The lecturers used breakout sessions, PowerPoint, and the whiteboard. In contrast to in-person lessons, Zoom lectures allowed less flexibility and agility between different tools and methods. Nevertheless, recording the Zoom sessions offered an advantage to students that could not attend the lecture.</p> <p>Also, there was less noise distraction for students and the lecturers during the lectures.</p> <p>At the university, no change in the student's work quality was detected, but this could also result from using different examination formats.</p> <p>At the company, the supervisors identified a lower quality in the student's results but higher punctuality and commitment to meeting times. There was less</p>

	switching between rooms, so it was easier to be on time for and schedule meetings.
4) Learning outcomes	<p>According to the students, professional competence in methodological competence has significantly increased greatly because digital and specialist knowledge improved. In addition, the company identified better communication skills for students working online and a different kind of teamwork, which is more demanding for leaders and supervisors.</p> <p>Despite positive outcomes, the different professional experiences may result in a generation of graduates who have yet to see a company from the inside. The student's knowledge could get lost because of less practice than in an on-site lecture and the new examination formats. For example, students might not gain the basic knowledge of a topic, but only on one topic they did their presentation or written paper about.</p> <p>The development of a professional network suffered due to fewer team events, private interactions with colleagues at work, and less contact with other students, which are important for their future network.</p> <p>Finally, more students reported loneliness or mental health problems to the supervisors and lecturers.</p>
5) Pedagogical innovations	<p>At the company, most employees accepted the new norms, but different opinions of minority groups led to cultural conflicts. The conflicts were not specific to interns or students but generally observed by the company.</p> <p>The onboarding process at the company stayed the same due to the online environment. The existing process was adapted to an online environment with the support of PowerPoint slides. Personal contact decreased as the company building and employees were less present for the students. This could have affected their identification with the company.</p> <p>As the student worked at the company before the introduction of working from home, the switch did not impact their identification with the company.</p>
6) Technological innovations	<p>The company introduced MS Teams for digital communication before Covid. Since the pandemic began, MS Teams has been increasingly used for video calls and conferences. At the university, Zoom is used for digital lectures. Regarding the hardware, the employees at the company were equipped with laptops, headsets and additional hardware if necessary. At the university, lecturers could order new hardware for their home office, and the lecture rooms at the university were equipped with cameras and streaming software to allow hybrid teaching formats.</p> <p>Beyond that, the company or the university used no additional software or hardware to support eWBL.</p>
7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL	<p>The biggest driver to implementing eWBL was the governmental regulation, which required students and employees to study and work online.</p> <p>At the company, the acceptance by colleagues was the biggest obstacle to implementing eWBL as they wanted to avoid training interns.</p>

	<p>Also, teaching technical knowledge to interns in departments apart from administrative tasks created a barrier to eWBL at the company.</p> <p>Other barriers for students, companies and the university were technological obstacles and requirements, as there was a lack of technical understanding from the lecturers, a lack of infrastructure in both organisations, and a lack of good quality internet speed and reliability at home.</p> <p>Finally, uncertainty for the students regarding the organisation of the studies and the examination formats created obstacles for eWBL.</p>
<p>8) Long-term impacts of eWBL</p>	<p>Companies and universities encourage others to assess which systems are necessary for which purposes and to understand the environment and the systems to ensure that the IT system works reliably. Employee training is required as part of the change management to reduce the fear of working online and enable them to adapt to the situation as quickly as possible. This is also true for students and lecturers. Still, understanding which methods work best is a continuous learning process.</p> <p>Additionally, universities suggest meeting the students at least once on-site before starting online lectures to improve the way of working together and to support the student in getting to know each other. Accordingly, the students are encouraged to study in groups to improve their network and establish relationships.</p> <p>In summary, eWBL could lead to a loss of knowledge for the students, missing personal contacts, and having a less positive work experience in the companies.</p> <p>The hybrid format at work and university is suggested to combine the best of both worlds. On the one hand, working remote reduces travel time, thus increasing free time and allowing more productive and focused work. On the other hand, a personal presence improves personal interaction. Therefore, it is important to find the right balance between online and offline. Companies believe that employees should be able to decide if they want to work in the office or from home, always keeping in mind that some jobs do not allow working from home. With increasing working from home options, companies can also reallocate their office space, as employees do not need their own office anymore. At the university, specific elements like consultation hours from lecturers to students or the colloquium of the Bachelor's and Master's thesis could remain online. Further, a hybrid format requires more flexibility, e.g., when the lecturer is sick or for the examination format when a student is already in an internship or a semester abroad.</p> <p>In the future, working online is an important skill everyone should learn as soon as possible.</p>