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

Case Studies – netherlands (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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Name of the case	Dutch case study 4
Country(-ies)	Netherlands
Disciplinary sector	Business management, innovation management
Case written by	André Perusso

Section	Answer
1) Organisations' background	This case is based on a multidisciplinary bachelor's and master's programme offered at a university in Amsterdam. In this multidisciplinary programme, students familiarize themselves with innovations in the field of sustainable energy and health and lifestyle care and how R&D-based innovation in these fields can be best introduced into the market. Through the so-called 'research internship', students write their bachelor's or master's projects where they follow how innovations are introduced into the market from the organisations' perspective. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some work placements were more research-oriented and some more practice-oriented. This case covers the practice-oriented type of work placement. A venture capital (VC) firm specialising in industrial technologies such as quantum computing, biomanufacturing and robotics is one of the different companies that collaborate with the programme by offering placement positions to its students. The current case study is based on a practice-oriented internship conducted at this venture capital firm.
2) Design, delivery and management.	Work in the VC firm was organised as follows. Every Monday a strategical meeting where several employees were present, including interns, took place. While interns did not (actively) participate much, it was important for them to be present in these meetings to absorb the more general nature of venture capital work and how high-level decisions are made. Regarding specific intern work, firstly the company instructors have an initial face-to-face meeting with them to give detailed instructions on how the work should be done. Once these initial instructions were given, interns could work online on their specific tasks. During the online phase, it was critical to have continuous feedback loops between interns and supervisors to ensure that interns were working on the relevant things and not deviating from the proposed task. Interns were also highly encouraged to request 30-minute phone-calls with more experienced employees whenever they were lost or needed more specific feedback. Supervisors also gave interns feedback at a "meta" level. Given the more overarching nature of these conversations, they were typically conducted offline, where interaction is more fluid and one can more easily visualise the whole internship "journey". From an IT perspective, the VC firm worked in a Google-based environment (Drive for sharing files, Hangouts for fast communication and conferencing, Google CRM for workflow visualisation, etc.). From the HE side, the internship/research project was divided into four stages. To complete each stage (and be allowed to move to the next) students have to deliver assignments which are preceded by feedback sessions based on specific rubrics. Between stages, the HEI offers students several forms of reflection and feedback that check on student improvements based on what was discussed in the assignments. These reflection sessions are delivered both individually and in groups. This allows students to share insights with peers and learn from each others successes and mistakes.
3) Difference, similarities and impact on learning outcomes	On the *work output* produced by interns, the VC firm placement supervisor believes that working online was not detrimental but the lack of close interaction often meant that interns focus their attention on matters that were not the most relevant. This could have been avoided if work was done offline. Consequently, the VC firm stresses the importance of having continuous feedback loops when

	working online.
	The HE placement coordinator also stressed the lack of awareness of what interns are doing as a problem of online placements. The main concern lies in losing track of how students are performing and how to assess it. This was mitigated by building up a more structured process of feedback and consultation with more frequent "touch points". Moreover, the rubrics used to measure learning outputs were re-interpreted for the online environment. Similarly, in the online environment students' tasks sometimes shifted from in-company observation and work to the analysis of documents and company reports that do not require so much physical presence. Regarding the development of *soft skills*, the VC firm placement supervisor stressed that a significant part of the venture capital job is to attend investor presentations. Because of COVID-19, these events took place online, which impacted soft skills development. On the one hand, it allowed interns to participate in presentations and events that they would not be able to participate in if they were held offline. On the other hand, the online environment is not the ideal means to deliver such presentations or host these events. Consequently, students have not been able to capture a significant part of the venture capital work environment and thus also did not develop associated soft skills such as public speaking, verbal communication, negotiation skills, etc. Similarly, the lack of start-up events and physical investment meetings limited the network capabilities offered by the internship. The HE perspective on soft skills development is different. Since written communication plays a bigger role in online work, the HE placement coordinator believes that online internships fostered students' writing skills. Likewise, because in online environments interns could not rely on their supervisors for immediate instruction as they used to, they started to communicate better and more frequently among themselves (peer-level), which fostered collaborative problem-solving. The interviewed intern also agrees that online work can develop soft skills, especially oral and written communication. About the *company and work culture*, the VC firm placement supervisor mentioned that the company enjoys a high level of informality and relevant matters are often discussed during lunch and coffee breaks. The online environment, however, did not contribute to students' acquiring this particular way of doing work. Consequently, as soon as lockdowns were no longer mandatory the company encouraged employees to work from the office more often, especially interns. The HE coordinator agrees that aspects of the workplace culture cannot be absorbed online, being more problematic to some sectors than to others. Notwithstanding, online work supports other positive attitudes that are relevant to everyday work including discipline, independent problem-solving and self-efficacy. The interviewed intern also mentioned that she missed the workplace routine; leaving the house, interacting with colleagues, getting 'properly dressed', etc. However, she was still capable of absorbing some of the organisational cultures by talking to people and understanding their views on the industry. Lastly, about *networking* skills, the HE coordinator agrees that online work might lead to an 'underdeveloped' network after the online internship. Nevertheless, 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. Although challenging to some, this capability of reaching out to people actively could benefit students just as much as possessing an extensive network. Similarly, the interviewed intern affirmed that she created a strong network of 4-5 people whom she regularly consults with. Also, she was retained by the company she was working for, even though her internship was online. With the end of COVID-19 restrictions, she was also capable of strengthening the relationships she initially built online.
5) Pedagogical	The HEI and the VC firm introduced a few pedagogical instruments to facilitate online working. They include:

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innovations	- *General meetings:* the VC firm interns participated in weekly strategic meetings (every Monday) with the senior partners. While not active participants, joining these meetings allowed interns to better understand the company's strategy and culture. - *Low barriers:* the VC firm 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 should not be reticent of contacting supervisors whenever relevant questions emerge. - *Team lunch:* the VC firm encourages interns and supervisors to have lunch together (face-to-face) once or twice a week to discuss work issues but especially to get to know each other on a more personal level. - *Team-based model of supervision:* The internship experience is 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 have they solved them.
6) Technological innovations	No particular technological innovation was introduced. The VC firm used a Google environment to manage the online work. This included email, instant messaging, conferencing tools, file-sharing systems and collaborative workflow management.
7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL	To the placement supervisor at the VC firm, the main driver of an online internship is saving commuting time and offering more flexibility regarding working times. As the supervisor illustrated, he is more productive in the evening hours and thus prefers to work until late than start early. Online work allows him to do that. The interviewed intern stressed the same points as the advantages of online work: flexibility to determine your ideal working hours (when one is most motivated) and being able to easily reach out to people who are physically distant. Conversely, the main barriers to online internships are the difficulty to absorb the company and workplace culture. Given that, he stressed the importance of decreasing communication barriers between interns and supervisors in online internships. Supervisors should be reachable via a simple phone call or be able to request short meetings. He also suggested to pre-plan a few meetings to align expectations and offer feedback. These initiatives are central to making the intern feel like he/she is a part of the organisation and that he/she is working in a team. Another barrier, this one more difficult to circumvent, is that online interns miss the opportunity to participate in important events and presentations which work significantly better face-to-face. The lack of socialisation was also stressed by the interviewed intern as a major setback of online work; not so much for acquiring practical knowledge, which was still possible, but for the daily contact with the working environment. The HE coordinator also sees as drawbacks of online work the lack of sensitivity to office culture and less direct access to data sources and key people. As for positive aspects, she highlighted autonomy, self-dependent learning and more efficient communication, especially written. The HE coordinator also emphasised the importance of collaboration in online environments. Since students work from home, having less contact with peers and instructors, HEIs must organise structures where interns and supervisors can collaborate, working more as a team rather than unilaterally. That not only reduces the feeling of alienation but also makes the work more effective because interns help each other to overcome similar problems. Examples of these collaborative structures include recurring meetings but also the creation of standardized materials and rubrics that facilitate collaboration and communication. Lastly, the interviewed intern mentioned that HEIs (and organisations) must make clear that online internships bear the same amount of responsibility as offline internships. This is relevant because she observed a tendency among students of taking online internships less seriously than offline ones.

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8) Long-term impacts of eWBL	According to the VC firm placement coordinator, the more self-dependent work is better performed online because it reduces disruptions. These types of activities will likely remain being performed online. From the HE side, eWBL will impact how feedback and mentoring are delivered (more and more online) and hybrid work (half home half online) will probably be the standard form of work.

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