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

Case Studies – Slovenia (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 1

Name of the case	Case study 1 - Slovenia
Organisation(s)	University of Ljubljana and company (Graphic studio)
Country(-ies)	Slovenia
Disciplinary sector	Graphic and Interactive Communication
Case written by	University of Ljubljana
Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)	

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This case describes the online internship offered to students of the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering of the University of Ljubljana (Graphic and Interactive Communication programme), delivered at the company in Slovenia that provides services in the field of graphic design and collaborates with the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering by providing internship positions for their students that need to perform a 15-week WBL in the winter semester of the 3rd year of studies (BA). Since the study year 2020/2021 the internships under the study programme Graphic and Interactive Communication took place mainly or exclusively online. The nature of creating graphic design is favourable for online work, which is mainly conducted on the computer and with tools that students already use on their computers during their studies. The communication between the intern and the mentor in the company was implemented through videoconferences and telephone meetings where tasks from the mentor and work from the intern were delivered and explained. Participants also described the experience in terms of advantages and disadvantages of such internship and their opinion of what the future of internships might look like.

Section	Answer
1) Organisation's background	A company – a graphic studio, based in Ljubljana (Slovenia) that provides services in the field of graphic design (graphic solutions for web and print). The Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering (University of Ljubljana) offers two study programmes – Graphic and Interactive Communication and Textile and Fashion Design. Their students need to perform a 15-week WBL (600 hours) in the winter semester of the 3rd year of studies (BA). Each student has a pedagogical mentor at the faculty and a mentor in the company where he or she performs the WBL.
2) Design, delivery and management.	In the study year 2020/2021, 17% of the students performed their internships exclusively online, 44% in a hybrid format and 13% needed to terminate their internship early due to the pandemic. In the 2021/2022 study year, 9% of students performed their internships exclusively online and 30% of them in a hybrid way. Others performed it offline – physically in the companies. However, only students of the Textile and Fashion Design programme needed to terminate the internships early as the nature of their work demands physical presence in the industry. The WBL under the Graphic and Interactive Communication programme has moved almost entirely online in the study year 2020/2021.

From the faculty side, internships were moved to the online environment without a specific plan of action and without special preparation of the students for the transfer of the internships online, as the arrangements for the internships (that take place in the winter semester) are made in the summer. Prior to the 2020/2021 academic year, there was no expectation of the measures that would require distance work and the arrangements took place as usual. In the following academic year, the arrangements also took place without any major peculiarities, as the Covid-19 measures in the summer months were relaxed. Another favourable factor while approaching the companies was that the faculty has an established collaboration with most of the companies regarding accepting their students to internship positions. As the WBL transferred online, the faculty |

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	checked whether or not the students have the ability to work remotely using their own computers and equipment. Those who did not have this option terminated their internship early and did not complete the required number of hours. The study committee then compromised that they could successfully complete their internship by adding a theoretical chapter in their final report that each student prepares after the internship, which was related to the work tasks that the student had in the company. This assignment was then given to each student by his or her faculty mentor. The transfer of the WBL into the online environment did not represent a radical change for the company, which had already been working with outside collaborators in this way before. Even before Covid-19, they already prepared the environments (project management software) that are essential for organised remote work. Concretely, they had the necessary project management software and access to programmes they use. The graphic design work is, according to the company, designed for remote work. Thus, all the interns were immediately involved in real projects. The mentor from the company met with the students in online meetings at regular fixed times, which were later adjusted according to the progress of work. If necessary, they would meet on Zoom and share a screen, but sometimes it was enough to hear each other on the phone. As reported by the student, at the start of the WBL, daily meetings were held via Microsoft Teams with the mentor in the company. Tasks and guidance was received from a mentor in the company via videoconference, and further communication and reporting back happened when certain phases of the project were ready to be presented. In certain phases, only a phone call was sufficient, sometimes a videoconference twice a day if necessary. All the information the student needed to perform tasks was obtained, the mentor was very responsive.
3) Difference and similarities	The coordinator of WBL at the HEI is in favour of face-to-face WBL, especially because the socialisation aspect cannot be replaced by online meetings and gatherings. Student feedback highlighted a lack of social contact between mentors and colleagues in the companies. 9% of students were less satisfied that their internship took place remotely. However, as reported by the students the quality of the WBL was not reduced due to the fact that internships took place online. The issue that was reported by some students refers to the experience that – when performing internships remotely - they received work assignments from the company throughout the day and it was difficult to make a distinction between work and leisure time, so that the working day stretched over the whole day. The company also recognises that there is a lack of a social component in the online internships The mentor believes it is important to meet students in person at least occasionally, if possible. As far as the work is concerned, everything else can be organised well or better, because everyone - company, students and clients - needs to be better prepared for the meetings. But socialising is highly restricted in online environments, both between colleagues and with customers. However, to work remotely, more self-discipline and self-organisation is needed which is more time efficient.
4) Learning outcomes	The faculty coordinator of the internships observed that students had regular online meetings with their mentors, but there was much less teamwork. Students gained fewer soft skills and there was less

	communication. Online communication was less fluid as students were more reserved. There was also a lack of practical examples that the student could otherwise see and experience in face-to-face work when observing colleagues or engaging in conversation with them at work. For some students, remote work suited them because some companies were very flexible regarding working hours, and they could spread their work over the day. The work was more individualised. The networking opportunities were also negatively affected by online work. Developing a professional network was more difficult to create, however, students could still receive contacts, but to a lesser extent. Traditionally, around 40% of students who perform an internship in a company continue to work in that company after they finish with it, and no drop-off has been observed in this regard since transferring the internships online. Regarding the specific nature of the interns' tasks, the work processes and the outcomes were not highly impacted by the migration to the online setting. The company reports that the biggest lack was in the area of getting to know the company culture and their colleagues. The meeting points were via videoconference and via occasional coffee outside where not only work matters were discussed, which they organised as they believe that the face-to-face socialising could not be replaced. The work has transferred very successfully to the web, it was perhaps even better implemented than if they had worked together in a studio, because all involved workers needed to follow more structure and order (e.g. it was not possible to change instructions or ask questions at any time). Such work is, as reported, more efficient and productive. The students were gaining independence, and the company mentor was able to work with two or three interns, which would have been very difficult if they would work altogether in a studio/office. The work can be better organised remotely. The company mentor also felt that the work better prepared the student for later independent project work. The way the work was done was that tasks were distributed, and the student did what he/she knew, and questions were asked in the meeting, not constantly at work. It was communication at a higher level. The student reported that working hours were more flexible, which was suitable for them, as graphic design is a type of work where inspiration is needed, and it was good to have the possibility to follow their own ideas and create their own schedule of work. However, gaining soft skills such as public speaking and communication skills was more difficult. On the positive side, such work stimulated the developing of computer literacy and efficiency. Moreover, all the necessary materials were always close to them as they did not have to travel, so it could not happen that they would be forgotten at home. The downside was a lack of personal contact with people and the limitation that everything needed to be presented on a computer via screen sharing (not physically on the spot). Working remotely also meant that a person can work in a familiar environment and with familiar equipment. Thus, if any issues appeared, they could be resolved faster. In general, graphic design work can easily be done remotely, similar competences are acquired. However, such an internship brought the student good references, but not as strong a professional network as a face-to-face internship would.
5) Pedagogical	The intern and mentor in the company met for a coffee (in the garden)

innovations	several times (prior to the internship and during) to interact face-to-face. The meeting was partly informal - not only work matters were discussed.
6) Technological innovations	The company had used virtual environments before the pandemic. They used such environments when working with external collaborators. These practices were then applied to work with interns. They had projects in cloud storage, and they had project management software. Specifically, they used Dropbox and Asana, as well as Microsoft Teams for video calls. Regularly, email and phone calls were used for communication as well. The student already had all the necessary programmes and software on their computer, as they were essential for their studies, so they had no technical problems carrying out the work. The only thing they had to coordinate with the company was the versions of the programmes in which they were working. Video calls and emails were the tools for communication between the student and the pedagogical mentor at the faculty.
7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL	Not all study programmes are equally adaptive for remote work. For example, in the case of the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering, the Textile and Fashion Design programme demands face-to-face work in the industry, while Graphic and Interactive Communication is "designed" for remote work. However, it is still always necessary to check in advance with the company where internships will take place and whether the tasks in the company are appropriate for remote work. This is also necessary to avoid exploitation of students. Regular online meetings between students and both pedagogical mentor and company mentor are needed. Even if the work is done remotely, it would be a good idea for students and mentors to meet in person at least occasionally (which can happen also before or after the internship) to get to know the company culture and staff in person. Personal contact is important. From the company's perspective, it is necessary to prepare the environment for work as well, in case of remote work - the virtual office. Accessibility of materials and project tracking are important. Videoconferences that are supplemented with phone calls and emails, when necessary, are essential. It is important to have a good structure for work and a clear division of job tasks in order to work efficiently. Personal face-to-face contact cannot be replaced; thus it is necessary to see colleagues and mentors in person from time to time, which can also occur in an informal gathering. The student's perspective confirms the HEI and company perspectives. The importance of regular communication, including occasional face-to-face meetings, and clear division of tasks is emphasized.
8) Long-term impacts of eWBL	Before the Covid-19 pandemic, all students at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering performed face-to-face internships. Currently, even with no measures taking place, some students still perform online internships. Thus, the WBL and work itself will in many cases (where this is possible – such as in a graphic design field) remain online. Numerous students will be subjected to remote work later on in their regular jobs, even if they would prefer to work face-to-face, because remote work means fewer costs for a company. From the company perspective, interns will continue to work remotely in the future. From their point of view, distance work makes people

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	more productive, and the company has fewer costs. Moreover, working remotely saves time that would be spent #commuting to work. The only problematic aspect of remote work is the lack of social contact (including brainstorming and live interactions) between colleagues. Thus, working in the studio (face-to-face) once or twice per week would be ideal in the respective field.

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