



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.

Prepared by: The University of Groningen



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CASE STUDY 1

Name of the case	Dutch case study 1
Country(-ies)	Netherlands
Disciplinary sector	History and international relations
Case written by	André Perusso
Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)	
<p>This case described the online work placement offered to the BA and MA students of the History and International Relations programmes at a Dutch HEI from the north of the Netherlands, delivered at a Dutch governmental agency concerned with education. The main task performed by interns was to support their supervisor in revising and informing interested parties on policies established at a European level and how these policies impact different Dutch educational entities. The placement experience was conducted mostly online with a few afternoons where interns and supervisors worked together, face-to-face. The internship was permeated by several pedagogical innovations, some introduced by the supervisor and some at an organisational level. The most relevant ones include i) monthly meetings with all interns (both at HE and the organisation), ii) work walks, iii) meeting briefings & de-briefings, iv) online socialisation activities and v) part-time face-to-face work (blended). These innovations were extremely relevant to the success of the internship and to avoid what was described as the main setback with online WBL; the lack of socialisation.</p>	

Section	Answer
1) Organisation's background	<p>The government agency is responsible for financing and informing participants about the Dutch educational system as well as collecting and managing educational data. It has around 2,300 employees. This particular case is based on the internship provided at the Department of International Services, which has about 15 to 20 employees and deals mainly with policy-making in Brussels and its implications.</p> <p>The HEI is a research-intensive university with a global outlook. It is in the top 100 of the most influential ranking lists. It holds currently 27,000 students and 5,500 staff members from home and abroad.</p> <p>Every year, three to four students from the HEI Bachelor or Master's programmes in History and International Relations work for four to six months at the International Services department of the governmental agency. There, they support policy advisors in conducting internal and external lobbyist activities to influence the policy of the European Commission. Additionally, they anticipate policy developments by reading and analysing the new proposals of the European Commission. Interns also collect the input of experts and coordinate consultations in name of the department.</p>
2) Design, delivery and management.	<p>Given the sudden change in working conditions due to COVID-19, a significant part of the work placement activities had to be planned as the situation unfolded. From the HEI side, this meant that significant time was dedicated to updating students, lecturers and partner companies about current COVID-19 rules and trying to arrange internship positions for all the students, especially for programmes where the internship was mandatory. Once the situation became more "stable" the HEI organised individual and collective mentoring and feedback sessions with the different interns and other support structures.</p> <p>From the agency side, placements were moved to the online environment without a specific plan of action at the organisation level (partially because several tasks were already being conducted online). Like the HEI, support at the organisation level focused on COVID-19 updates and sharing of useful information on how to maintain an adequate physical and mental state and what to do in case of stress, fatigue and other problems. When it comes to the actual work, apart from giving interns access to its IT system (being a governmental agency this meant they needed to install different software), the online transition was organised mainly by the placement supervisor, without major directives from top management.</p> <p>Given this background, the work was typically organised as follows. At the start of the day, via conference call set-up the day before, the supervisor and students went through their emails and envisaged a plan of action based on priority and due date. Urgent tasks were discussed immediately. Other tasks were given</p>

	<p>specific deadlines. Throughout the day, the supervisor and students were continuously in contact, either through chat, email, phone or conference calls. As the COVID-19 situation improved, it was allowed for interns to spend half of the day in the supervisor's house, which happened three to four days a week. This facilitated the communication and distribution of tasks between the supervisor and interns but especially the process of mentoring and feedback. In addition to work, the agency organised a few social activities. Employees received a package by post with food and drinks that were supposed to be shared during online happy hours. Other activities included online wine tasting, online games, etc. The agency also organised walks in parks and other open spaces to talk about work and non-work subjects. Interns could also contact other interns to share experiences. This was done through monthly meetings organised by the agency. Some of them were online but five were physical meetings, taking place once COVID-19 rules allowed for it. Towards the end of the internship period, the HEI organised mentoring and feedback sessions with all interns of a given department. There, they could discuss work-related matters but also socialise with other interns. Lastly, interns had a Whatsapp group where they shared experiences and arranged informal meetings, coffee breaks or happy hours.</p>
<p>3) Differences, similarities and impact of eWBL on learning outcomes</p>	<p>Task management and the quality of interns' work were not highly impacted by the shift to online work. The nature of the interns' tasks, the processes involved and the outputs were rather similar. In some situations, quality increased due to the need to constantly brief interns. In other words, interns were more micromanaged.</p> <p>Similarly, the acquisition of <i>practical experience</i> did not change much with the shift to online work. According to the internship supervisor, interns were able to perform almost all the typical tasks associated with policymaking and policy advisory, becoming very good at it. The same happened with the transfer of practical into theoretical knowledge; interns could contrast theory with practice to have a better understanding of how theory applies to the specific context of policymaking. Interestingly, the fact that most meetings and discussions were online increased the rate of interns' participation in those meetings, perhaps because the cost associated to include them was close to zero. This allowed interns to observe situations that they typically would not observe in offline work.</p> <p>Assessment and evaluation were not more or less problematic, both at the agency and the HEI. Forms were already completed digitally before, and feedback sessions took place online but the content discussed remained the same. Regarding <i>soft skills</i> acquisition, interviewees agree that they were developed despite activities taking place online. Interns still took part in meetings, worked in teams, made presentations, and had discussions. Although online, these activities can support the development of soft skills, particularly those related to written and verbal communication. However, according to the interviewees, the depth - but especially the scope - of skills is more restricted online. Some skills, such as networking and teamwork are much more complicated to develop online. This is mainly attributed to the lack of time, before during and after meetings, to observe non-verbal communication and engage in networking activities. The internship supervisor partially mitigated this problem by offering interns a "briefing" at the start of each meeting, informing them who was taking part in the meeting, what their roles were and, in the end, discussing the outcome of the meeting.</p> <p>Socialization among interns and between interns and company staff is highly restricted. Despite attempts to promote it (e.g. online happy hours and interns' meetings), interviewees believe that online work is not sufficient to develop personal-level relationships and, consequently, acquire the skills and attitudes typically associated with this close contact. <i>Networking</i> is particularly undermined. It is very difficult to create strong and personal bonds with people, inside and outside the organization, without being physically present. Lastly, concerning <i>company culture</i> and the rules and norms of the workplace, interviewees believe some aspects of it can be captured online, especially through online meetings. Language, level of formality, and a general sense of "who is who" inside the company are some examples. However, participants agree that important aspects of the agency and its culture were missed.</p>

5) Pedagogical innovations	<p>Interviewees mentioned several pedagogical innovations introduced by the agency, the HEI, and the placement supervisor herself. They include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The agency sent employees packages with “goodies” to be enjoyed during online happy hours and socialising activities like games and wine tasting. The fact that the goods were sent by the agency increased participation in these events. - The agency encouraged employees to do “work walks” where they could meet in a park or another open space to discuss a particular business problem or socialise. - The agency organised monthly interns’ meetings, where they could meet face-to-face, socialise, and share work experiences. The HEI also promoted similar meetings during and at the end of the internship. In the case of the HEI, the meetings included interns from the whole department who were working at different companies. - As a means of socialisation, the agency interns created a WhatsApp group. - Once COVID-19 restrictions allowed it, interns were invited to work a few days a week in the afternoons at the internship supervisor’s house. In non-COVID-19 times, the house could be replaced by an office, co-working space, or a similar environment where work can be done together. - At the start of every important meeting the internship supervisor at the agency offered interns “meeting briefings”. There, interns were instructed on who was taking part in the meeting, what was their role, what interns could say or not, how they should say it and at what times. - Supervisor and interns were constantly online (via email, chat and phone calls), not just during meetings. This created a sense of closeness and facilitated communication and feedback.
6) Technological innovations	<p>No particular technological innovation was introduced.</p>
7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL	<p>The main driver of online work is increased flexibility. Not having to commute, travel to and from meetings, or be interrupted by colleagues improved productivity. On the other hand, interns’ motivation and mental health is negatively impacted by the lack of socialisation opportunities and by working only from home. This leads to a narrow soft skills base, few or no networking opportunities, and a limited understanding of the company culture. Unfortunately, the attempts to mitigate this lack of social contact (e.g. online happy hours) were not sufficient because they were less enjoyable than face-to-face activities, not necessarily increasing interns’ motivation. While the interviewed student did not feel that himself, interviewees reported that other interns they knew suffered from loneliness and low motivation.</p> <p>The “blended” solution offered by the internship supervisor (work at the supervisor’s place) was seen as highly beneficial, especially because of the mentoring and feedback opportunities. Alternatively, in a post-COVID-19 situation, both companies, organisations, and interns should strive to meet face-to-face at least twice a week, either in someone’s house, the university, the company’s office, a co-working space, or a public place.</p> <p>Another important element is the so-called “onboarding phase”. If the internship is to be performed fully or mostly online, the company should invest in a robust onboarding scheme, ideally face-to-face. There, interns would be welcomed, introduced to key people, and acclimated to the company culture.</p> <p>Finally, universities should strive to build stronger communities for their interns, where they could meet face-to-face, share experiences, create a professional network, or simply advise each other.</p>
8) Long-term impacts of eWBL	<p>Most meetings will remain online, especially those that are outside of the company’s premises. Additionally, due to the dominant analytical nature of the intern’s tasks, some - if not most - of the intern’s work activities will remain online. Interns would go to the company a few days a week or on a part-time basis. For students, such increased flexibility can be beneficial as it will be easier to combine university commitments (e.g. exams, thesis writing, travel) with work placement activities.</p>