Higher Education in Post-Covid19: The Digital Transformation of Work-Integrated Learning Programmes

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Abstract:

Due to the Sars-Cov-2 health emergency and the forced stoppage of regular teaching and traineeship activities, digital work-integrated learning models have been widely proposed to Higher Education students. Blended practices and experiences referred to as virtual or simulated work-integrated learning or digital workplace learning are emerging as instrumental in achieving several educational outcomes and, among them, a positive attitude toward Professional Learning and Development. The contribution intends to reflect on the main issues that the Higher Education systems have been facing during the pandemic, with a specific focus on the management of internship and work-integrated learning activities and projects, and the possible widening of the definition of work-integrated learning.

Keywords: Digital Transformation; Higher Education; Internship; Professional Development; Work-integrated Learning

1. Introduction

Due to the Sars-Cov-2 health emergency and social distancing measures imposed by governments around the world, Higher Education systems have been forced to evolve from an on-campus to an online teaching-learning scenario and to the exploration of alternative strategies to guarantee teaching, learning, and services to the students.

With reference to the education and training sector, the Council of the European Union, within the *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030),* emphasised that «the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated that education Z and training systems must be sufficiently flexible and resistant to interruptions in their regular cycles» (Council Resolution 2021, C 66/3) in order to find strategies and «solutions to continue the delivery of teaching and learning processes in different ways and contexts, and to ensure that all learners […] continue to learn». Under the goal of the European Education Area, by

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2025, education and training systems are expected to ensure «the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens» together with «sustainable economic prosperity, the green and digital transitions, and employability» (Council Resolution 2021, C 66/3).

Concerning specifically Higher Education systems, the focus on the digital transformation was evidenced by studies and empirical researches concerning the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning. The phenomenon has been analysed also by international analysis and reports that underline, above all, three issues that Higher Education faced: firstly, the impact on teaching and learning due to restrictions on campus, face-to-face teaching, and the increase in online education and hybrid teaching mode; secondly, the impact on international mobility, with specific rules for incoming international students and the increase of virtual mobility and strategies to encourage forms of Internationalization at Home; and, thirdly, the impact on transition from Higher Education to work due to the reduction in job opportunities (EUA 2021, 2022; OECD 2021a; Unesco 2021). Regarding this last point, Unesco (2021) highlights that, on the one hand, COVID-19 has caused damage to the global economy by reducing job opportunities and increasing the unemployment rate. Nevertheless, on the other hand, many countries reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced the digitalization process based on the transition into teleworking, increasing the demand for information technology skills.

This transition has also concerned internship and job placement in Higher Education. However, little is known regarding the impact of this shift on internships and strategies followed by Higher Education institutions to guarantee forms of getting to know the world of work even during the pandemic and alternative solutions within study programmes that require internships for graduation to support their students so as not to delay their graduation (Teng et al. 2021). If reports especially focused on Work-Based Learning opportunities are available with reference to the VET systems, focused on challenges faced in order to guarantee practical components of VET in school-based settings facing a relevant shortage of opportunities (Cedefop 2020; OECD 2021b), this point emerges as only lightly explored by studies and analysis focused on Higher Education, and general data on the phenomenon are limited. Nevertheless, both conceptual and empirical studies are provided about micro-experiences offered to specific targets (e.g. students attending a specific study programme) with reference to blended practices and experiences referred to as virtual or simulated Work-Integrated Learning or digital workplace learning proposed to Higher Education students to replace on-site internship or job placement opportunities. Under this framework, the contribution aims to reflect on the main issues that the Higher Education systems have been facing during the pandemic, with a specific focus on the management of internship and Work-Integrated Learning activities, projects and programmes and their possible expansion based on the digital transformation forced by the health emergency.

2. Toward New Models of Work-Integrated Learning

The above-mentioned strategies to guarantee forms of getting to know the world of work refer to what is called in North American literature Work-Related Learning (Dirkx 2011) and in Australian literature as Work-Integrated Learning (Cooper et al. 2010; Gardner and Barktus 2014). Both terms concern the integration between formal and professional settings, to create meaningful benefits for students, organisations, and other stakeholders (Gardner and Barktus 2014; Frison 2016). Based on consolidated definitions provided internationally, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is used as an umbrella term referring to a period spent in a professional environment with different purposes and objectives such as study, the development of generic or technical skills, and the exploration of possible career options and job opportunities (Coll et al. 2011). On the other hand, it is more widely related to «a complex educational phenomenon. It is at once a set of educational missions (e.g., careers education), a range of activities (work experience), a collection of topics (understanding credit and work) and a repertoire of teaching and learning styles» (Huddleston and Stanley 2013, 11). Indeed, as Stewart and Owens (2013) underline, Work-Integrated Learning must combine workplace learning with theoretical learning, even in degrees without a vocational focus where spending time in the workplace is not required by the study programme. Beyond the traditional definitions of Work-Integrated Learning, Zegwaard and Rowe underline that «as the practice of WIL continues to expand, it is indeed time to broaden the range of types of WIL that are offered to higher education students» (2019, 330).

Already before the pandemic, new models of Work-Integrated Learning were emerging. As highlighted by Kay and others (Kay et al. 2018), models such as micro-placements, hackathons, competitions and events were moving away from approaches requiring extensive time in workplaces toward short, authentic activities. Furthermore, since before the health emergency, the literature highlighted the effectiveness of blended versions of Work-Integrated Learning, defined as virtual or simulated Work-Integrated Learning (Fong and Sims 2010; Sheridan et al. 2019, 8) or digital Workplace Learning (Littlejohn and Margaryan 2014), based above all on study cases focused on specific targets and referred to the offer of learning environments that enrich the workplace experience, generally according to a blended approach. An example was offered by Larkin and Beatson (2014) who proposed a blended approach combining face-to-face workshops and online resources, using online reflective journals and digital stories as assessment of a marketing internship. Fong and Sims (2010) shared the experience of using asynchronous Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to implement e-WIL (electronic Work-Integrated Learning) in the curriculum of an undergraduate business degree subject at Victoria University. ICT was used to support interactions between students and stakeholders to pursue a more inclusive WIL experience through technological networking capabilities. In 2019, always before the pandemic, Sheridan, Gibbons and Price referred to the use of online theoretical instruction and online WIL assessment within an

undergraduate Capstone core business subject. Empirical research has recognised these blended versions as instrumental in achieving several educational outcomes, such as the development of employability skills (Jackson 2015) and professional identity (Bowen 2018), as well as the exploration of career opportunities and the facilitation of students' transitions to the workplace (Billett 2009).

Study cases traceable in the literature show how these proposals have seen an important implementation in the lockdown phase and interruption of teaching and learning activities and on-site Work-Integrated Learning strategies. They are emerging as alternative ways to offer students de-situated WIL opportunities, which authentically refer to settings and professional challenges by emphasising their educational and learning potential, even if remotely. It seems that the digital version of WIL refers to virtual interactions that alternate moments of work in the field with online activities.

Anyway, in the course of 2020 and the epidemiological emergency, with a specific focus on internships, proposals carried out entirely remotely have increased together with blended internship. An example is the work of Bisland, Nagy and Smith with reference to the professions in the tourism and hospitality sector. The authors emphasise the centrality of «innovative virtual elements of the program served to prepare students for real placements, and also to develop their self-agency to experience learning in placements distant from the education provider» (2020, 426) led by the premise that «campuses can close, but learning must continue» (Nguyen and Pham 2020). Likewise, a significant literature review was developed by the Centre for Research on College-University of Wisconsin-Madison Workforce Transitions to find common criteria to define «online internship», guided by the recognition that «online internships have become the central modality of work-based learning for students around the world» (Hora et al. 2020, 3). The authors notice the variety of terms being used to describe Work-Based Learning programmes that do not occur in a face-to-face manner, such as virtual, micro-, remote, and online internships. They also underline that «the variability that exists among traditional in-person internships (e.g., duration, quality of tasks, type of mentoring) also applies to online or remote internships» (Hora et al. 2020, 7).

3. Work-Integrated Learning in Italy and at the University of Florence: Three Study Cases

Due to the Sars-Cov-2 health emergency and the forced stoppage of regular activities, digital WIL models have been proposed to higher education students in Italy as well. Concerning the Italian emergency, the Prime Minister's Decree of 4 March 2020, regarding urgent measures related to the containment and management of the pandemic, announced the stoppage of all educational activities in the schools of every order and degree and the attendance of higher education activities starting from 5 March 2020. Based on clarifications offered by Rectoral Decrees, Italian universities reacted almost immediately by providing guidelines and activating institutional platforms for the management of Distance

Learning, to guarantee a regular continuation of study paths during COVID-19. Conversely, the development of strategies to face the stoppage of WIL opportunities was more gradual and based on individual university initiatives.

An exploratory study conducted during the first lockdown months investigated universities' reactions within the wide area of career guidance and WIL to identify strategies to transfer face-to-face services into remote digital ones to deal with the health emergency (Frison and Pellegrini 2020). A documented analysis of university websites, specifically concerning internships, helped identify three different strategies activated by Italian universities: firstly, the stoppage of the internship experiences until the end of the lockdown; secondly, the replacement of the internship with a remote modality according to the host organisation in agreement with the university tutor; thirdly, the replacement of the internship with a distance proposal offered by the university, for carrying out the entire internship or part of it[1]. The analysis showed that six weeks after the suspension of the in-presence activities, only 5 out of 62 analysed universities offered and formalised alternative strategies for completing the hours missing until the end of the internship, proposing opportunities of «replacement of the internship with distance modalities»[2] (Frison and Pellegrini 2020, 246).

Within the third strategy of replacement of the internship with a distance proposal, two relevant experiences can be found at the University of Florence, both situated under the wide framework of digital WIL.

Indeed, among the five above-mentioned universities, the University of Florence was one of those that promptly reacted with the programme Training to work: building your future. The programme – still in progress – was aimed at students belonging to any course of study, from bachelor's degrees to doctoral courses, with the aim of supporting them in the process of personal and professional development. It was designed within the framework of Career Development Learning embedding the pedagogical and formative dimension of employability not as a result, but as a learning facilitation (Boffo 2018; Smith et al. 2020), via the implementation of work-related strategies and methods. Three modules have been proposed starting from March 2020, focused on: firstly, how to write a CV; secondly, how to write an introduction letter; thirdly, how to prepare for a job interview. From the beginning of the programme until January 2021, 1584 students and graduates were involved (Boffo and Frison 2014). Even if the programme was designed independently from and before the health emergency to offer an off-site, flexible and on-going opportunity for students inspired by digital work-integrated learning models, due to the lockdown it was opened to students who had not reached at least 60% of the scheduled internship hours,

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[1]   For an in-depth analysis of the survey carried out in the country, please refer to Frison and Pellegrini 2020. The goal of the exploratory study was to identify and distinguish between strategies that provided just an only one online transposition of face-to-face services into digital ones, opposite to strategies that led to a rethinking and redesigning - even partial - of guidance services and Internship.

[2]   Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

ensuring that they would acquire the ECTS necessary to complete the mandatory internships to obtain their degree in the April 2020 session[3].

While the above-mentioned experience was aimed at all students belonging to the University of Florence, a specific proposal targeted master's students on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. A formative model guided by the principles of WIL and a self-directed guidance approach (Federighi et al. 2021) implemented to enhance the training potential of digital exposure to the world of work. With the aim of offering students an opportunity for online internships, the programme Internship-ON proposed four modules, each with a different focus: firstly, encouraging a reflection on their professional prospects; secondly, enhancing knowledge about educational services and organisations (by means of scenarios, simulations, and a revised version of the business model canvas); thirdly, enhancing knowledge about educational services' management processes; fourthly, designing a Personal and Professional Development Plan. The digital internship proposal – which is still in progress – was first implemented between May 2020 and November 2020, in two distinct editions, and involved over 250 students, future adult learning and continuing education professionals[4].

The two above-mentioned programmes offer two different study cases on digital WIL in line with the international literature. The first one aims to support the development of employability skills offering students digital environments that allow them to benefit from first opportunities of connection with the world of work, facing tasks and challenges authentically related to professional contexts to facilitate students' transition to the workplace (Boffo and Frison 2020). The second one aims to replace a situated work experience, providing students with an opportunity of exploration of professional settings in the educational field, and a first contact with professionals to support the development of professional identity as well as the exploration of career opportunities in the sector and the knowledge of educational organisations.

4. Health Emergency and Digital WIL Proposals: Arising Themes

While referring to the sources cited above for a more in-depth analysis of the experiences presented, starting from them and from the international literature on digital WIL, it is possible to identify some emerging themes and lines of development regarding the proposals of WIL programmes in Higher Education.

First of all, the above-mentioned programmes carried out at the University of Florence, in line with the international literature on WIL, can enhance the reflection on the inclusive potential of digital and blended forms of WIL to deal

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[3] For any further clarification on the proposal, here is the link to the Career Service of the University of Florence: <https://www.unifi.it/p10548.html>. For further details on the framework under which *Training to work: building your own future* was designed, please refer to Boffo and Frison 2020.

[4] For further details of results from a first survey of participants' perception of effectiveness and functionality of the digital internship proposal, please refer to Del Gobbo et al. 2021.

with inequalities and access difficulties to career education and Work-Integrated Learning opportunities (Frison 2022). Despite being focused on WIL to face the health emergency, the two case studies also offer a link to themes of equity, inclusion, and the differences in the ways students from low socio-economic backgrounds or rural/peripherical areas access information and opportunities and make decisions about their careers. As Groves and colleagues highlight about this issue, «one student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that» (2021, 1). Digital WIL programme shave the potential to reach wider numbers of students, facilitating access and an initial approach to the workplace.

Secondly, in this way digital WIL programmes can assume the profile of possible pre-WIL programmes (Davis et al. 2020), namely digital WIL opportunities as preparatory programmes, which initiate both students (and supervisors, if involved) in dealing with situated work experiences and figure out challenges and requests potentially coming from the workplace. According to this preparatory approach, digital WIL allows the university to design and arrange collaborative multi-stakeholder partnerships (Groves 2021, 1) that become the basis for further in-presence work placement opportunities, starting from the inclusion of multiple stakeholders, such as education and training providers, companies, non-formal organisations, and the community as well, that provide more chances for students to explore a range of career options and pathways and expand their network.

Thirdly, this preparatory approach helps to overcome an association between WIL experiences as guidance opportunities strictly related to decisions and choices about further study paths or careers as well as the sequential approach 'study first, work later'. Independently from the stoppage of in-presence activities, digital WIL can be integrated within the curriculum offering regular face-to-face classroom sessions in conjunction with online WIL to overcome also the so-called 'too little, too late' proposals (Moote and Archer 2018) in favour of more, earlier, and longer-term work-related programmes and offers.

Fourthly, an earlier approach – even if undirected – with the workplace and with the university's work-related proposals, can encourage students' awareness about the relevance of attending academic events and work-related opportunities provided by the university and the study programme based on a collaborative partnership with stakeholders and the community (e.g. programmes provided by the university's career service or guidance, career education, and job placement opportunities especially designed and carried out within the study programme). The theme of networking and university-community partnership emerges as a key issue: both as an entry factor for the design of digital WIL activities – with support and cooperation provided by workplace witnesses and companies, key actors involved in both the above-mentioned programmes – and as an outcome for attending students who have the chance to know, meet and keep in contact with representatives of the world of work.

Arising themes about Higher Education in post-COVID19 and the ongoing digital transformation of Work-Integrated Learning highlight how the definition of WIL is embracing more and more challenges, opportunities, and a va-

riety of methods and activities, toward a broader perspective compared to the past. The impact of digital strategies followed by Higher Education institutions to guarantee forms of WIL even during the health emergency and the evolution in the post-COVID period of these alternative solutions provided by study programmes require deeper analysis in order to identify success factors and methodological inputs toward an increase of WIL opportunities that exceed the goals, the design and the timing provided so far.

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