INTERNSHIP-ON: A WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING DIGITAL MODEL

Giovanna Del Gobbo, Daniela Frison, Marta Pellegrini
(Universitá di Firenze, ITALY)

Abstract

The paper presents a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) digital model proposed in response to the situation created by the health emergency due to Sars-Cov-2 virus for master's students on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. A total of 147 students attended "Internship-ON" in two different editions. A variety of methods and tools have been proposed, aligned with learning outcomes per module. The paper describes the key tools and the main results collected via a final questionnaire developed and implemented in order to evaluate students' perceptions of the content and structure of the course and the support given through group coaching sessions.

Keywords: Work-Integrated learning, higher education, career management

Debates surrounding the capability of Higher Education Institutions to produce work-ready graduates have dominated the Higher Education debate at both the academic and policy levels for many decades. Emphasis is traditionally devoted to university-workplace transitions and the encouragement of more interactive learning environments and partnerships with the job market, to integrate formal and professional settings creating meaningful benefits for students, organizations, and other stakeholders. Universities are promoting strategies to encourage *University-Business Cooperation*, emphasizing the centrality of cooperation between the academic and the productive world, as well as *Work-Integrated Learning* (Cooper et al., 2010; Gardner & Bartkus, 2014; Huddleston & Stanley, 2012) opportunities that engage students in self-reflection and learning processes.

Within this framework, effective guidance actions are considered a key aspect and may influence the understanding that young people have about themselves and the Labour market. Indeed, the lack of understanding of the Labour market among young people is one cause for the mismatch between their aspirations and the reality of their jobs. Early exposure to the Labour market and workplace plays a significant role, as does the involvement of professionals and organizations in career guidance (OECD, 2017, 2018).

Universities are engaged in providing career and placement services in order to facilitate the transition to the Labour Market, and self-directed guidance approaches are considered particularly effective and innovative to achieve this aim. Internships represent a way to get to know the world of work and to learn how to improve personal and professional skills from work experiences. Furthermore, recent literature has highlighted the effectiveness of blended versions of work-integrated learning, defined virtual or simulated work-integrated learning (Fong & Sims, 2010; Sheridan, Gibbons, & Price, 2019) or digital workplace learning (Littlejohn & Margaryan, 2014) in which students, teachers and stakeholders converge within an ICT-mediated learning community – such as game-based learning, simulations, social networks, mobile applications or MOOCs.

Evidence from a recent meta-analysis of experimental studies showed a medium effect (ES = +0.20, p <.001) of online learning compared to in face-to-face instruction (Means et al., 2013). The effect size is even larger for distance learning with undergraduate

students in higher education contexts (ES = +0.31). Among different educational strategies delivered online, cooperative learning (ES = +0.25) and instances of expository instruction by the teacher (ES = +0.39) have positive effects compared to individual work. Furthermore, some practices show promising effectiveness according to the authors of the meta-analysis, albeit to be confirmed with further research given the lack of statistical significance: (i) exercises and practical activities mixed with presentations; (ii) the entire duration of the course over one month for greater effectiveness in terms of student learning; (iii) the course is taught by the same teacher or tutor.

Internship-ON: a Work-Integrated Learning Digital Model

Within the above-mentioned framework and evidence of effectiveness, we piloted a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) digital model in response to the situation created by the health emergency due to Sars-Cov-2 virus, which forced a stoppage of regular traineeship activities in Italy. The proposal targeted master's students on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning (University of Florence) who have potential access to a wide range of jobs in the field of education and training. Demand is increasing for professionals specialized in the design, planning, management and evaluation of non-formal educational activities and services, professional and continuing training of young people and adults, or in the provision of a specific training service (career guidance, team building, coaching, etc.). This implies on a robust ability to manage one's employability to make it sustainable over time (Knight & Yorke, 2004) and in different contexts.

Therefore, this implies a consistent strengthening of self-perceived employability (Magnano, et al., 2019) which can be fostered by knowing the multiple employment opportunities and opportunities. In this context, professional identity is not a state that is definitively achieved through training and consolidated through work experience. Internship-ON is based on a definition of identity as a dynamic construction, consistent with the concept of career development: subjective and contextual factors, and interpersonal interactions can play a crucial role in this dynamic. Individuals play a fundamental role as agents of the process of creating their professional self-image (Cohen-Scali, 2003; Patton, 2001; Slay & Smith, 2011).

Methods and strategies inspired by WIL have been implemented to enhance the training potential of a digital exposure to the world of work. With the aim of offering students an opportunity for online internships (Internship-ON), four modules were designed and implemented, each of which had a different focus:
- developing a professional identity through a reflection on the student's professional inclinations,
- enhancing knowledge of non-formal educational organizations and a reflection on career opportunities,
- becoming familiar with the management of non-formal educational organizations,
- designing a student professional development plan.

Each module consists of three main phases: a video-introduction on the objectives and the activities of the modules; three activities to be completed individually; and a coaching support aimed to help students to finalize the activities as well as to reflect and share their opinions.

Representatives of local educational organizations were involved in the design and implementation of the course through interviews and the development of materials to create module activities and work-related assignments. A variety of methods and tools have been proposed, aligned with learning outcomes per module (Federighi, Del Gobbo, & Frison, 2021). Among them:

- immersive scenarios, aimed at encouraging exploration of cases and problems emerging from the educational setting, and summarizing and reflective tools such as a revised version of Business Model Canvas,
- a Personal Development Plan (PDP) to improve critical reflection on the learning process and to support the planning of future steps in education, training, and entering the world of work,
- online group coaching synchronous session to encourage discussion and group reflection as well as to support relationships between the participants even at a distance,
- self-evaluation tool at the end of each module concerning learning outcomes,
- final self-evaluation.

Internship-ON in Practice

A total of 147 students volunteer to attend Internship-ON in 2020 in two different editions (May-July 2020 and September-November 2020). A questionnaire (currently in use) was developed and implemented by the research team in order to evaluate students' perceptions of the content and structure of the course and the support given through coaching. The questionnaire consists of 23 items in the following sections:

1. Personal details (6 items) - closed-ended items regarding student information, such as the course of study, the year of the course, previous internship experience.

2. Perception of the effectiveness of Intership-ON (5 items) - items on a Likert scale to be assigned a score from 1 to 5 according to the level of agreement with the statements presented.

3. Perception of the functionality of the path (9 items) - items on a Likert scale to be assigned a score from 1 to 5 to know the perception of students regarding the adequacy and functionality of specific elements of the course, such as contents and times. Two open-ended questions were dedicated to free comments and suggestions by the students for the improvement of Internship-ON.

4. Usefulness of the coaching (3 items) - a closed-ended question and two open-ended questions to understand how useful the orientation coaching sessions were to guide the accomplishment of tasks and reflect on the activities.

The Likert scale used in Section 2 and Section 3 of the questionnaire consists of five points, with the low end corresponding to "Not at all" and the high end to "Very". For the second section of the questionnaire, the scale measured the level of agreement, for the third section it measured the level of satisfaction.

144 students out of 147 have completed the questionnaire. According to the personal details section, half of the students (50.7%) attended the first year of the course at the time of the Internship-ON, 42.4% the second year, while a low percentage of students (6.9%) who were not aligned with the session exam schedule. Few students (9%) stated that they have had previous experiences of internship in person in educational or training settings. In addition, 30.6% of students expressed their intention to carry out internships in person when the health situation makes it possible again. Students' answers about the effectiveness of the course showed that Internship-ON has increased their knowledge regarding future job opportunities and supported students' reflection about the role of educator in different contexts. Furthermore, students highlighted that the course improved their knowledge of educational settings. The presentation of settings where the educator usually works through videos, interviews, pictures was considered an effective way to make connections between students and educators, to be combined with the usual internship at the organizations.

Regarding section 3 and 4 of the questionnaire, the students reported that the overall structure of the online course was particularly appreciated and the coaching provided by a

tutor during the course was useful to complete the proposed activities based on the answers of the students who attended the coaching. 30% of the students attended at least one coaching meeting, 70% did not, mainly for working reason. Of those who participated, 34 students found coaching useful for carrying out their tasks. In particular, the students highlighted the following positive aspects: being able to receive clarifications on the activities; being able to reflect with colleagues and the tutor on aspects that emerged during the exercises. Some of the students' comments are: "I believe coaching is fundamental for the success of the course, because it allows for an exchange and therefore to clarify doubts and perplexities"; "It was interesting to reflect on what we had faced alone in the various tasks; "It was an opportunity to ask questions on things that were not completely clear"; "Useful for reflecting, interacting and having an exchange".

In line with the self-directed learning approach, the activity ended with a self-assessment exercise on the learning outcomes achieved. The "Radar" tool was used: it is a tool that helps visualize, by means of an area chart, levels of achievement (five: from not achieved to fully achieved) of each of the established learning outcomes. An Excel file has been set up with the description of the expected learning outcomes, divided into the learning areas provided for the modules. In addition to the self-assessment of the knowledge acquired and the understanding of particular aspects of the world of work, the exercise led to a reflection on learning outcomes related to the fifth Dublin Descriptor "learning skills", expressed in line with the second cycle of university education: study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous. The three learning outcomes referring to this descriptor are:

1. identify one's training needs and define the stages of one's personal and professional development plan,
2. use the experience acquired to promote self-assessment actions aimed at one's personal and professional development,
3. manage the process of joining the world of work.

147 radars have been compiled and overall, the students believe that they have achieved these results with an average of the answers provided that lies between level 3 (sufficiently achieved) and level 4 (largely achieved). Only rare cases report a level 2 (partially achieved).

Internship-ON offered the opportunity to define and apply a training device that has shown good potential in the university course of study of future educators. In fact, the internship has increased students' awareness of their role as educators and in building an open professional identity through the development of their self-management and self-regulation skills. The first application of Internship-ON mainly involved students close to university graduation, who benefited from the course to formally complete their mandatory internship. However, the results presented show the possibility of using Internship-ON at the beginning of the master's degree course, to support the choice of type of organization in which to carry out the internship and following the entire development project.

In this first application, data were collected on students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the course. In addition to self-assessment tools, future applications also need to administer tools to measure the knowledge and skills acquired by the students during the course, by measuring to what extent the educational action carried out lets them:

- develop awareness of the opportunity to acquire professional project management skills,
- reflect on the factors that support the levels of consistency of the professional project, with respect to the study program and to personal expectations and life experiences,
- anticipate the post-graduate phase of disorientation in order to have the skills of positive and constructive management of transitions.

References

Cohen-Scali, V. (2003). The influence of family, social, and work socialization on the construction of the professional identity of young adults. *Journal of Career Development, XXIX*(4), 237-249.

Cooper, L., Orrell, J., & Bowden, M. (2010). *Work integrated learning: A guide to effective practice*. Routledge.

Federighi, P., Del Gobbo, G., & Frison, D. (2021). Un dispositivo di self-directed guidance per orientare alle professioni educative. *Educational Reflective Practice, 11*(1), 22-36.

Fong, M., & Sims, R. (2010). e-WIL in student education. *Interdisciplinary Journal of E-Learning and Learning Objects, 6*(1), 45-60.

Gardner, P., & Bartkus, K.R. (2014). What's in a name? A reference guide to work education experiences. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, XV*(1), 37-54.

Huddleston, P., & Stanley, J. (2012). *Work-related teaching and learning. A guide for teachers and practitioners.* Routledge.

Knight, P., & Yorke, P. (2004). *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*. Routledge.

Littlejohn, A., & Margaryan, A. (2014). Technology-enhanced professional learning. In S. Billett, C. Harteis, & H. Gruber (eds.), *International handbook of research in professional and practice-based learning* (pp. 1187-1212). Springer.

Magnano, P., Santisi, G., Zammitti, A., Zarbo, R., & Di Nuovo, S. (2019). Self-perceived employability and meaningful work: The mediating role of courage on quality of life. *Sustainability, XI*(3), 764-778.

Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., & Baki, M. (2013). The effectiveness of online and blended learning: A meta-analysis of the empirical literature. *Teachers College Record, 115*(3), 1–47.

OECD. (2017). *Youth aspirations and the reality of jobs in developing countries: Mind the gap*. OECD Publishing.

OECD (2018). *Working it out. Career guidance and employer engagement*. OECD Publishing.

Patton, W. (2001). Career education: What we know, what we need to know. *Australian Journal of Career Development, 10*, 13-19.

Sheridan, L., Gibbons, B., & Price, O. (2019). Achieving WIL placement and theoretical learning concurrently: An online strategy for Higher Education institutions. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice, 16*(3). https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol16/iss3/8

Slay, H. S., & Smith, D. A. (2011). Professional identity construction: Using narrative to understand the negotiation of professional and stigmatized cultural identities. *Human Relations, LXIV*(1), 85-107.

Watts, A.G. (2001). Career education for young people: Rationale and provision in the UK and other European countries. *International Journal of Educational and Vocational Guidance, 1*(2), 209-222.