

# **A Lifelong Learning Strategy at the University of Antwerp: Blended Learning Routes for Working Students**

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## **Abstract:**

*Lifelong learning has become a significant issue in higher education, in the European Union as well as in its member states. The higher education institutes play an important role here and can encourage adults to go (back) to higher education. The University of Antwerp (Belgium) focuses on flexible studying and recognises the working students as a specific target group. Next to some regular evening programmes, the university offers blended learning routes for working students. By organising a reduced amount of teaching hours in combination with more independent learning and e-learning, it is more feasible to combine a job, a study and a personal life. To support these students, Centrum WeST, the centre for working and studying, was set up.*

## **1 Introduction**

Higher education for adults seems to be a growing interest field in the context of lifelong learning. In the framework of democratisation and the equal chances debate, mature students who combine a job with a study are a particular target group. Special teaching methods are currently being worked out to respond to the specific needs of this group. The use of computer aided learning seems indispensable to support these efforts. A combination of limited teaching hours, more independent learning and e-learning is a possible and also efficient working method for these students. The University of Antwerp uses this specific approach, called blended learning, to develop study routes for working students.

## **2 Lifelong Learning in Europe and in Flanders**

After the Bologna declaration (1999) and the Lisbon declaration (2001), lifelong learning has become a part of higher education in Europe<sup>[1]</sup>. In this perspective Flanders gave shape to a policy of lifelong learning with three laws (so called “decrees”) with one of them paying specific attention to working students. These agreements are prove of the importance of the growing interest of different actors in stimulating higher education for mature people in the current knowledge society.

## **3 Working Students at the University of Antwerp and the Role of Centrum WeST**

In 2006 two educational development projects were set up to deal with some problems and difficulties with the traditional evening programmes. As a result of both projects, the centre for working and studying was set up (Centrum WeST).

Centrum WeST has four main tasks: the development of courses in blended learning in collaboration with the teaching staff, coaching and supporting working students, collaboration

with the different departments and services of the university and finally contribution to the policy on working students at the university <sup>[4]</sup>.

Nowadays the University of Antwerp offers traditional evening programmes in law and philosophy. There are also blended learning routes for working students in social work, sociology, nursing and obstetrics and instructional and educational sciences.

## 4 Blended Learning Routes

'Blended Learning' is a very broad term with many possible interpretations<sup>[2][3]</sup>. At the University of Antwerp it is understood as the combination of online learning, reduced hours of classroom learning and therefore a whole lot of independent studying.

For each course the blended learning formula is always course specific but all of them share the use (of various sorts) of e-learning. In some courses the e-learning is restricted to the available course material in an online learning environment but most courses are far more extended with self-evaluation tests, a forum, complementary information, self study tools, etc. Some classes are online available for the students by streaming video. This makes it possible for the students to 'participate' in class when they are able to.

As also the contact with fellow students and the teacher is a very important factor for the motivation of working students there are teaching hours but reduced in number compared to the day programme. This is a really welcome complementary teaching strategy to the e-learning.

## Conclusion

In order to define lifelong learning not just as a theoretical concept, the University of Antwerp applies e-learning as a component of blended learning. This method provides working students with the opportunity to subscribe in specific study routes and therefore makes participating (again) in higher education an accessible opportunity for all working students. The stimulation of innovation and the student centred-approach used in the blended learning programmes are important assets in the lifelong learning strategy. The various ways in which the online learning technique is presented to our target group depends on the subject but we try to explore a variety of the new e-technologies in order to reach our goals. With the use of e-learning, flexible learning and blended learning all students should be presented the possibility to have access to the lifelong learning strategy and broaden their knowledge.

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