

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

Verschaeren Joke¹, De Pelsmaeker Stefanie²

^{1 & 2} University of Antwerp (Centrum WeST)

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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. This also shows in the policies that are (being) worked out by the different governments. In order to keep up with those policies and their expectations to create opportunities for working students, 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.

Firstly the meaning of lifelong learning and what it looks like in the European policy shall be explored. These insights will be completed by how this policy has been translated in the policy of Flanders. Further on using the example of the practices at the University of Antwerp and its especially established Centrum WeST, the opportunities for working students made possible by the blended learning routes will be put forward. In this perspective the role of blended learning routes will be argued. Finally whether or not these blended learning routes are an answer to the growing interest field of lifelong learning will be critically discussed.

2 Lifelong Learning in Europe and in Flanders

2.1 L³ in Europe

Although education has always been a priority subject on the European agenda, it was not until far more recently that the concept ‘*lifelong learning*’ has become a hot topic. Lifelong learning has grown in importance through the debates and concerns in the European society. The EU recognizes that knowledge and innovation are its greatest assets and therefore had to get more focus through high quality education and training. However education is the responsibility of the national governments some challenges are common. In order to improve and aggrandize this knowledge base, these should be jointly tackled. Consequently the political cooperation was strengthened and more than one joint declaration has focused on how important it is to keep on gaining knowledge, even on the work floor.

The most known declarations are the Bologna declaration (1999) and the Lisbon declaration (2001). Thanks to the success of these, lifelong learning has become a part of higher education in Europe. Since 2000 the European Union has been working on several initiatives concerning education and training. Not all initiatives are specifically addressed to adult learning but in October 2006 the European Commission presented a communication on the topic of ‘Adult Learning: It’s never too late’. In this communication the Commission emphasizes that adult learning is an important aspect of lifelong learning. Despite the political importance the concept lifelong learning gained, adult learning has not always gotten the recognition it deserved. The Commission insists on an European Action Agenda and proposed to develop an action plan in 2007 to follow up the message sent out then. In September 2007 ‘the Action Plan on Adult Learning’ is communicated with a clear agenda. The first result of this agenda is the importance adult education has got in the ‘Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training’ adopted by the Council in may 2009. The four main objectives of the framework are the following: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improving the quality and efficiency of education and training, promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship and finally enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training. Of all of these objectives one really stands out for the working students. In the objective concerning making lifelong learning and mobility a reality is stated: *‘Further efforts are also required to promote adult learning, to increase the quality of guidance systems, and to make learning more attractive in general — including through the development of new forms of learning and the use of new teaching and learning technologies’*.

Next to the initiatives on a European level, the universities themselves created the European Universities’ Charter on Lifelong Learning (EUA, 2008). The purpose of the charter is supporting universities with the development of their role as an institution of lifelong learning. It contains commitments made by universities as well as commitments proposed for governments. For example universities should increase access within the scope of lifelong learning by adapting their study programmes and by recognising prior learning. The government should remove specific legal obstacles and encourage partnerships.

2.2 *L³ in Flanders*

Some of the European objectives and proposals concerning lifelong learning described above become more concrete by their translation in the higher education policy in Flanders. Flanders, which is the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, has its own regional government and is the competent authority for policies on education, training and work. Lifelong learning is often linked to further education outside the higher education sector, for example vocational training. However there is also the perspective of lifelong learning in bachelor and master programmes. Flanders gives shape to a policy of lifelong learning in higher education with three laws (so-called “decrees”) with one of them paying specific attention to working students.

After the introduction of the bachelor-master-doctor degree and the credit system in higher education in Flanders by the decree on restructuring (2003), there was the decree on flexibilisation of 2004 that aims at the organisation of flexible higher education. Distance education for example is mentioned in the decree as a possible working method. Furthermore, previous qualifications and working experience can lead to exemptions for working students. The decree on the financing of higher education directly stimulates the participation of working students at higher education. Universities that develop special programmes and coaching systems for working students will be extra financed.

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

3.1 *Centrum WeST – the centre for working and studying*

The changes in the lifelong learning policy of Flanders were translated at the University of Antwerp. The attention given to the situation of working students is one aspect and is the result of two educational development projects. In 2006 these projects were set up to deal with some problems and difficulties of the traditional evening programmes. Although some programmes were quite succesful in terms of student numbers, some critical weaknesses turned up and a few faculties decided to quit the offer of the evening programmes and/or look for alternatives. Different forms of distance education, the situation of working students and the development of new study material for independent learning were dealt with in these projects. Both projects expired after one year but the University of Antwerp wanted to continue the attention given to the working students and as a result Centrum WeST – the centre for working and studying- was set up. Centrum WeST has four main tasks:

First of all the centre coaches and supports working students. This means giving them information, answering questions, inform them about the possibilities, etc. To support the working students, the centre also organises workshops and sessions concerning different topics. Next there is the didactical and technical support for the teaching staff interested in converting tradiotional programmes in blended learning. It is not about distance education only, it is important to combine a reduced amount of teaching hours with more independent learning. This issue will be discussed below. Furthermore the centre tries to make sure the interest of the working students is taken into account at the different departments and services of the university. A final task of the centre is representing the working students at the policy level. That is why Centrum WeST is represented in several management boards.

3.2 Working and studying at the University of Antwerp

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. These blended learning routes are characterized by a reduced number of teaching hours and more independent studying. Since it is often difficult for working students to attend a lot of classes, the teaching hours are most of the time used for exercises, explanation by the lecturer or questions from the students. The study material is also developed for or adapted to independent learning. In part 4 we will discuss the concept of “blended learning” more in depth.

Next to the programmes for working students, the university also uses flexible admission requirements and the possibility to compose an individualised study route.

Concerning flexible admission, the decree on flexibilisation deals with the recognition of acquired competences and qualifications. At the university students can get exemptions for specific courses by means of acquired qualifications and competences.

Furthermore, students can compose their own study route (under certain conditions), depending on already obtained diplomas, courses they passed and their possibilities concerning study load.

By these provisions, working students have the possibility to combine their study with their job and their personal life.

3.3 Some figures

Last year Centrum WeST sent a survey to all the students at the University of Antwerp to establish a profile of the working students and to discover the particular characteristics and needs of its target group.

The results of the survey showed that the working students are a very diverse public. In general we can conclude that the majority of the respondents is young (32% is born between 1981 – 1985) and female (56%), graduated from “general secondary education” (77%) and has a higher education degree (83%). More than half of the respondents work fulltime (55%) and are enrolled in an education in human sciences.

Students’ opinion on blended learning was asked as well, giving some concrete examples of what it could look like. The working method of combining reduced teaching hours and more independent learning would (probably) be chosen by 67%. A concrete planning of deadlines, support and a clear structure of the study material are important aspects for them. In the next part we will briefly discuss the concept of lifelong learning and explain more in depth how blended learning is interpreted at the University of Antwerp.

4 Blended Learning Routes

In this section we will first discuss a theoretical framework of blended learning in the light of a changing higher education landscape which has been mentioned before. Which definition(s) is/are used in literature concerning blended learning and what is characteristic for this type of learning? In a second part we will take a look at the practical side by giving concrete examples of blended learning. Finally we will show how blended learning can be a valuable working method for working students.

4.1 A theoretical framework?

“Blended learning” is a very broad term with many possible interpretations. It is a working method that is used in very different contexts. Next to blended learning in (higher) education, which will be discussed later, it is also used in (corporate) training. According to Oliver & Trigwell (2005) it is introduced as a compromise position between a purely online and a purely face-to-face model of training. In this context it is seen as a combination of e-learning with other types of training delivery as well but the purpose is different: increasing revenue or reducing costs (Bersin & Associates, 2003).

Defining blended learning is not obvious and there is dissension in literature about it. The combination of online learning and classroom learning is however an often attentive characteristic in definitions of blended learning.

Rovai and Jordan (2004) describe the shift from exclusively traditional classroom instruction to delivering courses at a distance using technology as a focus of change in higher education. They consider blended learning as a flexible approach to course design that supports the blending of different times and places for learning, offering some of the conveniences of fully online courses without the complete loss of face-to-face contact. A study of the University of Winchester uses about the same definition and concluded that such a blended learning approach with the aim of providing a ‘superior learning experience’ using a mix of IT based resources coupled to continued ‘face to face’ instruction could be of benefit (Burgess, 2008).

However, some analyses of the concept show that the possible interpretations and meanings are that divers that this causes confusion, for example between what is meant by the developer and how it is interpreted by the student (Fransen, 2006). It is even suggested by Oliver & Trigwell (2005) to abandon the term entirely or use it for an approach that focuses on learning and not on teaching. They believe actual blended learning would involve students learning through experiencing variation in aspects of what it is that they are studying.

4.2 Blended learning in practice for working students

Because of the described dissension, we think it is useful to give a description of how blended learning is perceived at the University of Antwerp. As in most definitions, the combination of different aspects is crucial.

It is really important to stress the differences and the similarities between blended learning on the one hand and the regular day- and evening programmes on the other hand. Because working students are not able to follow classes during the day and because the amount of teaching hours of the evening programmes might be too much, blended learning offers a feasible opportunity. This meaning that the blended learning routes are a parallel but alternative programme with reduced contact hours and more didactical support in comparison to the regular day or evening programmes. Both programmes have the same course content, exams and lead to the same diploma. The difference lies in the educational and didactical approach.

For the University of Antwerp it is above all important not to completely abolish the contact moments. On the one hand working students are having trouble to attend classes but on the other hand the advantages of physical presence and contact outnumber these difficulties to attend class. Experience shows us that having a limited amount of contact hours facilitates the independent learning. The simple fact of meeting other working students is a highly motivating factor in persisting although combining studying and working is a hard thing to do. Working students experience during the contact moments that they are part of a group. This group cohesion is a mere factor when the student thinks he might fail or even give up. As we are certain that presence is of such a great importance the lessons take place at moments well announced on before hand and on feasible hours for working students, strongly reduced in number compared to the regular programmes.

4.2.1 Practical examples

As said above blended learning routes for working students in social work, sociology, nursing and obstetrics and instructional and educational sciences have been set up. Each blended learning route is different due to the specific character of the programme but they all have in common that they are characterized by a reduced number of teaching hours and more independent studying.

Blended learning not only varies between the programmes but even varies between the courses. Every course has different learning targets and goals and also a very different set up. That is why it is impossible to implement blended learning as a standard procedure. Every course has to be looked upon separately and be adjusted to its specific goals and needs. The tools to translate the course into a blended learning kind of course are limited and will be discussed below. Although the courses have to be looked at one by one, the blended learning programme has to remain uniform, it may not become a whole of different courses that are not aligned.

No matter how the course will be translated into a blended learning project the educational approach demands some serious technical support. Students are to be provided with good educational tools such as a digital learning system (Blackboard) and clear and good structured didactical material to support e-learning.

➤ *Possibilities with the digital learning environment*

The possibilities to use a digital learning environment are almost infinite. The most important advantage of using such an electronic environment is the possibility of reducing class presence but at the same time it is a challenge to use it in a correct and ultimate way to support the independent learning. It is a tool that simplifies contact, communication and data exchange between lecturer, students and fellow working students. But mostly the use of the digital learning environment has been limited to posting the materials (slides) used during the class by the lecturer. We try to encourage them to use the platform more often and in divers ways. Not only the lecturer can communicate or upload relevant information but can also stimulate the students to upload links or video fragments.

It can also be used as a forum to post questions and answers, to make group assignments or to hold discussions online. All of this can be monitored by the lecturer or his assistant. Next to this channel of communication the environment can also be a place where the lecturer can evaluate the students. He can post self evaluation tests for the students, give feedback on papers or even correct their home assignments or exams and immediately access the grade center.

This tool is quite a challenge and a time consuming task for the lecturer but at the same time really effective and efficient for students.

➤ *Streaming video*

Also other possibilities to support independent studying are being explored at our university. Some classes are being recorded and made accessible to the students through streaming video. Students have the possibility to watch the classes whenever they want and as often as they like. There is also the opportunity to watch only short bits or even a couple of classes at the time. Not only for the students this is convenient. Recording classes has some really attractive electronic extra's for the lecturer as well. The records can be used several years or can even be worked on. Slides can be added, interesting links or actuality can be shown in a second screen and even some relevant music or video fragments can be shown, making the lessons more informative, attractive and more interesting to watch.

➤ *Specially designed self evaluation tests, games or quizzes*

But not only electronic support is an important asset. Also the regular handbooks should add to the self study. Some presses add games, self evaluations, summaries or quizzes to the textbook. Not only on paper but sometimes even on a CD-rom or by setting up a website with additional information, parts of videos and computer supported self-evaluation tests. This contributes to facilitating the blended learning programme.

4.2.2 Strengths but also weaknesses

As mentioned above blended learning is a really efficient way for working students to get a second chance on a university degree. The efforts result in really positive outcomes. Overall the working students are having grades that outnumber those of the regular students and the succeeding percentages of the working students are to be quite high.

But despite all the efforts to support the working students a maximum, the programme has still some weaknesses.

First of all not all courses are fit to be translated in a blended learning teaching strategy. Mostly the theoretical courses experience no problems in finding an alternative for the traditional classes. But the more practical courses are finding that aspect far more difficult. The hands-on learning still remains important and often isn't replaceable by video training or contracted teaching hours. Students still have to attend these kind of classes every week. This meaning that blended learning is not the most suited solution for the practical programmes as for example sciences. More research should be done to find a way to make it possible to also offer these programmes to working students.

Another weakness in the blended learning routes is the cost of these programmes. This way of education demands more work from the lecturers and also more (computer based) support. Each year the extra tools that are offered to the students (self evaluation tests, streaming video, extra material, access to the online environment...) should be updated, adjusted or improved. It is therefore a more labour intensive way of teaching that also costs more.

But even taking into account these weaknesses of the programme we may not forget the great advantages of the programme: working students are able to get a second chance on education, have new career chances or even have the possibility on promotion. It is also a great challenge

for the lecturers to keep the lessons interesting and updated and to really use all the technology that exists nowadays.

4.3 Plans for the future

The programme has been evaluated by students and teachers and perceived as very useful. Therefore the existing programmes are being adjusted and improved wherever it is possible with the means at our disposal. The tool that has the most success is the streaming video. Students are really enthusiast and therefore more classes should be offered this way.

Next to that we have been looking at the needs and demands of the working students. We have seen that in more day programmes working students are interested in a blended learning programme. We are trying to expand this programme over more faculties giving the working students the opportunity to choose for a working students programme based on blended learning.

5 Conclusion

Since several years the importance of lifelong learning has become clear and is dealt with on European level, in the higher education policy of Flanders and at the level of the institution, in this case the University of Antwerp, as well. Working students are a particular target group at the university and to meet their specific needs, Centrum WeST was set up and the university uses a blended learning approach in some study programmes. The main task of Centrum WeST is supporting working students during their study and assisting lecturers in converting a traditional course in blended learning.

In order to define lifelong learning not just as a theoretical concept, the University of Antwerp applies e-learning as a component of this blended learning, partially to compensate the reduced amount of teaching hours. 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.

Although experience has shown that blended learning can be an effective strategy, there are challenges and difficulties to face as well. Next to the rather limited application in the exact sciences and depending on ICT and its possible limitations (costs, PC problems, etc.), we experience that blended learning is not the perfect solution to all the answers, it is just a possible instrument. A lot of working students still have problems with the combination of working, studying and a personal life and tend to quit (part of) the programme, move certain courses to the next academic year or fail/postpone the exams.

If the university wants to pay specific attention to working students in the context of lifelong learning, offering sufficient support and developing adapted study programmes are serious challenges in the following years.

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Author(s):

Joke Verschaeren
University of Antwerp – Centrum WeST
Blindestraat 14
B-2000 Antwerpen
Joke.Verschaeren@ua.ac.be

Stefanie De Pelsmaeker
University of Antwerp – Centrum WeST
Blindestraat 14
B-2000 Antwerpen
Stefanie.Depelsmaeker@ua.ac.be