

Integrating working students in Higher Education (HE): a case study

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Abstract

As lifelong learning is essential for the future of our society the EU set an ambitious target: 15% of the population aged 25-64 should be taking part in continuous education by 2020. So flexible learning approaches for a diverse student population are central in the institutional policy of the University of Antwerp. The focus of this paper will be on a specific target group: mature students in higher education who combine a full time job with their study programme.

Almost a decade ago the University of Antwerp adopted an inclusive approach in order to meet the requirements of working students and founded the Centre for Work and Studying (Centrum WeST) in close co-operation with the Open University in Flanders. The centre operates directly under the Department of Education and aims at removing any institutional, social and personal barriers that prevent working students to have equal opportunities of study. As the Centre actively promotes and supports blended curriculum development the University of Antwerp now offers 25 inclusive and innovative bachelor and master programmes, fit for working students but also beneficial to regular students. To date the centre remains unique in Flanders. So its career counsellors inform students about flexible learning paths offered by the University of Antwerp but also by other Flemish institutions.

Only by providing a flexible and inclusive institutional model universities can play a crucial part in a society that gives priority to upgrading the skills and knowledge of all its citizens within the European framework of lifelong learning.

Keywords: lifelong learning, higher education, working students, career guidance

1. Introduction

The promotion of lifelong learning and social inclusion is high on the policy agenda of the European Union. Strategic frameworks such as Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) aim at widening access in higher education (HE). These frameworks are also beneficial to those who are traditionally underrepresented or excluded (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). It will also increase the chances and opportunities for those who struggle to (re)enter HE. One of these groups is working students: students who combine work and studies.

Demand is high for lifelong learning (LLL). The amount of adult learners in HE is increasing steadily, especially one group: working students. In Flanders the number of working students in HE increased by 20% in the last 5 years (Vlaams Parlement, 2017). Even though supply of eligible and well-adjusted programmes are limited and sometimes lack the necessary flexibility. It is therefore important to get a clear overview on the target group in order to develop tailor-made programmes which cater for their specific needs.

One of the main obstacles for working students is a lack of employer support or conflicts with their work schedule. These obstacles hamper the promotion of a diverse student body. Low participation rates in lifelong learning/adult learning also lower competitiveness and undermine Europe's potential to generate smart growth (European Commission, 2012). It is therefore essential to create flexible, innovative learning approaches and delivery methods in order to improve quality and relevance while expanding student numbers.

In this paper we will focus on the target group: working students. First, we will give a short overview of some of the strategic frameworks concerning lifelong learning which are related to the issue of combining work and studies in HE. Secondly, we will provide a clear definition of working students and look at some of the challenges they face. Afterwards we will shift our focus to our in-house experience. We will discuss the diversity policy at the University of Antwerp and how it is implemented through e.g. career counselling and the creation of flexible learning paths. Finally, we will give some figures related to working students at the University of Antwerp, the implementation and adoption of an inclusive approach and how such a policy can be beneficial to regular students.

2. Literature review

2.1 Inclusion and diversity in higher education

In general, EU countries face three main challenges in raising higher education attainment levels i.e. broadening access to higher education, reducing dropout rates and improving the quality of higher education. Lifelong learning, inclusion and diversity hold part of the answer. The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009), the Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (2011) and the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth stress the importance of implementing lifelong learning policies in the higher education sector. They are key elements in response to a rapidly changing economic situation, to demographic ageing and to the broader economic and social strategy of the European Union (European Commission, 2010).

In 2009, ET 2020 set four common EU objectives to address challenges in education and training systems by 2020. One of which was making lifelong learning and mobility a reality. It also entailed some EU benchmarks

for 2020 on tertiary education and adult learning (Eurydice, 2011). Some are in reach or have already been obtained (e.g. at least 40% of people aged 30-34 should have completed some form of higher education: EU average: 39.1% and Flanders 47.1%) but other benchmarks are still far off target (e.g. at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning (EU average 10.7% and Flanders: 7.1%) (Eurostat, 2016a/b). Adult learners are also far more likely to participate in non-formal learning activities than in formal training, which means that these newly obtained skills are mostly acquired through short term programmes related to in-house competences. These are also less likely to be transferable.

Obtaining a degree at a traditional higher education institution at a later age still remains an arduous task seeing that provisions are often limited. Younger students often outperform part-time students and older students. Distance learning activities can offer a good alternative but some mature students are hesitant to enrol because of concerns regarding costs, lack of contact with instructor and fellow students ... (Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017). The Adult Education Survey (Eurostat, 2011) shows that during the last 12 months preceding the interview, as little as 2 % of all adults in the EU participated in a formal or non-formal learning activity with distance learning. Another pathway which remains open is the validation of non-formal and informal learning (e.g. work experience). Validation can be provided by HEI or public employment services (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

2.2 Working students: a definition

General terms such as 'non-traditional', 'second chance', 'adult', 'mature' and 'working' students often overlap within a European context (Panacci, 2017). They refer to either older students (older than 23-25-30 years), students who did not participate in any form of formal education in the previous year or students who combine work and studies (as an employee, with a student employment or with an apprenticeship).

Combining work and studies is not per definition an obstacle or negative. Some researchers even describe positive returns from student employment. After graduation these students have a lower unemployment risk, a shorter job-search duration, a higher wage effects and a greater job responsibility (Geel & Backes-Gellner, 2012). In these cases it acts as a signalling function. Other researchers find only moderate positive effects if work is in the same field of study or claim that the effect is smaller and statistically insignificant in later years (Häkkinen, 2006). Baert, Rotsaert, Verhaest and Omeij (2016) found through experiment that neither form of student employment (related or unrelated) enhanced initial recruitment decisions.

These research results offer a diffuse view concerning the effect of student jobs. There is also a significant difference between a student job and employment. General employment is often an essential part of a person's identity. In this paper we will also focus more on the target group of working students who combine work (i.e. general employment) with a study. In order to be eligible for additional provisions at the University of Antwerp, working students should hold at least a part-time job (50%), not a student employment. No requirements were set regarding age or minimum credits.

2.3 Issues faced by working students

The decision-making process of working students is often based on a cost and benefits analysis for the whole family unit (Gill, Hayes & Senior, 2015). Working students are not in a position where they can put their job

on hold, seeing that it is often their only source of income. Taking in account all these constraints, students who combine work and studies often have a higher intrinsic motivation than traditional students (Baptista, 2011). Callender and Feldman (2009) identified six discrete though often overlapping groups: 'delayed traditional students', 'late starters' following a life changing event, single parents, 'careerists', 'escapees' and 'personal growers'. Even though they are highly motivated, combining work and study appears to have in general a negative effect on academic progression and completion. Moulin, Doray, Laplante and Street (2013) found that there is a critical threshold of 24 hours of work a week, beyond which negative effects in terms of non-completion start to appear. They find no negative effects arising from not working vs working a few hours. Triventi (2014) also found a negative correlation for low-intensity work once accounted for unobserved heterogeneity.

The commitment of multiple roles, such as employment, family, and financial responsibilities generate higher levels of stress and anxiety (Lin, 2016; Sahari, Yusup, Affidah & Aiza, 2013). It can also have a negative effect on mental and physical health (da Luz, da Silva, Turte, Lopes & Fischer, 2012; Stone, 2014). Combining work and studies requires good stamina, motivation, time-management and planning.

As mentioned earlier, working students are often confronted with a lack of employer support or encounter conflicts with work schedules which impede them from starting, continuing and completing HE studies. Next to work related issues, family issues, other responsibilities ... play a role in extending the duration of studies. Increasing the duration can also increase inequality and decrease diversification in HE when studying entails high financial commitments (e.g. enrolment fees) (Metcalf, 2003).

Researchers also looked at preferences of working students concerning studying, teaching methods, attitude ... These seem to be in line with traditional students but also differ on some significant issues. Working students show higher levels of engagement and put a stronger emphasis on relating classroom learning to work related experiences (Woods & Frogge, 2017). They also prefer active teaching methods to classical teaching models which facilitate interaction with teachers and students.

These research findings have important implications on an instructional level for academic staff in HEI who want to cultivate an environment adapted to and suitable for lifelong learning. A differentiated approach seems necessary in order to cater for the needs of working students. Providing flexibility in study programmes to meet individual needs, encouraging autonomy and independent learning, providing variety in format and style and supporting collaborative inquiry are essential in providing the necessary tools for success (Chen, 2014).

3. University of Antwerp: institutional, strategic framework

In order to guarantee an open educational market to working students the institutional strategy needs to focus on an innovative and successful transition to technology based teaching and learning. Both faculty members and administrative staff should be aware of lifelong learners' need for flexibility and their specific learning profile.

Reaching this goal of continuing education and training for working students requires rethinking and redirecting traditional educational systems towards stimulating open and flexible learning paths that accommodate different types of learners in a supportive mutual learning environment.

Embedding concepts of widening access and lifelong learning in their institutional strategies is definitely a fundamental task for the universities. However, it is also a common goal for society as a whole to stimulate a culture of lifelong learning, which should develop incentives for working students and curriculum design fit for purpose. There is also an urgent need for debate on how lifelong learning programmes that will benefit individuals, employers and society as a whole can be funded fairly and adequately. In times of economic crisis and budget restrictions the key challenge is to find ways to open up the current educational services to a more diversified student group and to ensure further learning opportunities throughout a lifelong career.

In his policy declaration for the academic period 2008-2016 the rector of the University of Antwerp defined some explicit targets on lifelong learning:

- The number of working students should increase from 700 to 1000 (i.e. from 3 to 5% of the student population)
- Faculties should adapt more study programmes for the benefit of working students
- Faculties should develop more short post-academic programmes (20-60 ECTS)
- Faculties should integrate more courses of the Open University of The Netherlands in their study programmes, by recognizing the credits (ECTS) or by setting up joint programmes
- The national authorities should (financially) reward the university's efforts for working students.

In 2016 the newly elected rector confirmed these targets, while also assigning a specific role to distance learning as offered by the Open University alongside the traditional study programmes for working students. This strategy aims to bring more students in higher education, with improved success rates for students from disadvantaged groups.

The University of Antwerp distinguishes four interrelated core values in its vision on education, which apply to lifelong learning as well:

- *Nexus education - research.* Academic education is rooted in scientific research. University students need to acquire essential knowledge and skills to fulfil their part in society.
- *Competence-oriented education.* Students develop competences as an integrated whole of knowledge, skills and behaviours. Thanks to these competences the university graduates are able to act effectively and efficiently on an academic level in a professional environment.
- *Student-centred and activating education.* Students are seen as active and independent partners who manage their own learning. The educational programme should stimulate and support that attitude. It has an eye for specific talents and a genuine respect for different educational, professional, social, cultural or religious backgrounds and individual ambitions.
- *Internationally oriented education.* The university wants to foster an open and global vision in its students by international exchange and joint programmes. Students get the opportunity to prepare themselves for participation in scientific research at an international level.

In 2006 Antwerp University started two educational innovation projects concerning working students (in the faculties of Law and Social Sciences). The main purpose was to offer an alternative for the traditional 'evening programmes'. Both projects expired after one year but the University of Antwerp wanted to continue its efforts for the specific needs of the working students and launched Centrum WeST, a Centre for Work and Studying, in September 2008. The centre operates directly under the Department of Education, as it provides information and guidance to students who combine a full or part time job with a degree-oriented

study programme. Within the Department of Education Centrum WeST closely co-operates with the Open University in Antwerp.

Centrum WeST, the Centre for Work and Studying, covers five main goals:

1. widening access to higher education

The target group of the centre are students who combine their study with a regular job. Since they also have a third aspect to consider, their family life, the combination is not obvious at all. So the aim of the centre is to increase and sustain the motivation for lifelong learning, particularly among economically disadvantaged or low-qualified groups, by offering information to working students through various channels (e.g. brochures, website, newsletter, e-mail, personal appointments ...).

2. coaching and supporting working students

Besides informing working students, Centrum WeST also supports them in their study. Working students often have not studied for a long period of time and going (back) to university might be a new environment they are not familiar with. Problems may arise with planning the study load, IT skills, reading and writing academic texts, etc. Therefore Centrum WeST organizes -in cooperation with other departments and services- evening sessions and workshops to learn or refresh skills that are required for an academic study. The centre also offers networking activities and lectures on lifelong learning related topics.

3. development of courses in blended learning in collaboration with teaching staff

In order to guarantee an open educational market to working students the institutional strategy needs to be based on innovation and change. Therefore the University of Antwerp focuses on a successful transition to technology based teaching and learning through its electronic platform (Blackboard), which is also used in the evaluation process.

This system of blended learning is an interesting approach for the working students since the amount of lectures and working sessions can be strongly reduced and the study material is developed for distant learning and adapted for self-study. In close co-operation with the Open University of The Netherlands, the centre promotes and supports blended course and curriculum development in all faculties in order to meet the requirements of working students.

4. promoting the interests of lifelong learners

Centrum WeST tries to make sure that the interests of the working students are taken into account, both through internal collaboration with different university departments and services and external contacts with all stakeholders. Both faculty members and administrative staff should be aware of lifelong learners' need for flexibility and respect their specific learning profile (Huybrechts, 2012).

5. career counselling

Career management skills play an important role in the context of both flexible and lifelong learning Callender & Feldman, (2009). So in co-operation with the Flemish Ministry of Work Centrum WeST offers publicly funded career guidance services to employees who want to strengthen their position on the labour market by getting an additional HE degree. A professional career counsellor can put a person's qualifications, experience, strengths and weaknesses in a broader perspective while also considering his interests and

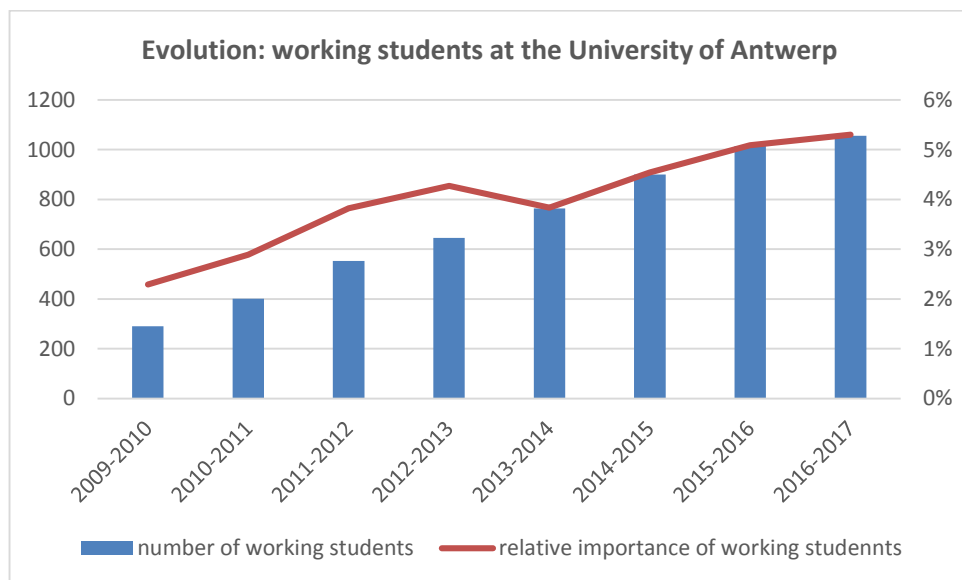
educational perspectives. So Centrum WeST supports mature students in gaining a better understanding of what really matters for them personally and professionally and helps them plan the combination of work and study more efficiently.

4. Working students and flexible programmes at the University of Antwerp

In the previous section we discussed policy implications concerning working students at an institutional, strategic level. In this section we will have a closer look at how these strategic plans are translated into practice and how they affect working students. In particular we will elaborate on what students can expect of working student programmes and the main characteristics of working students. We will also focus on study success of working students and how these numbers compare with traditional students and other target groups. The figures and data used in this section are specifically related to the University of Antwerp.

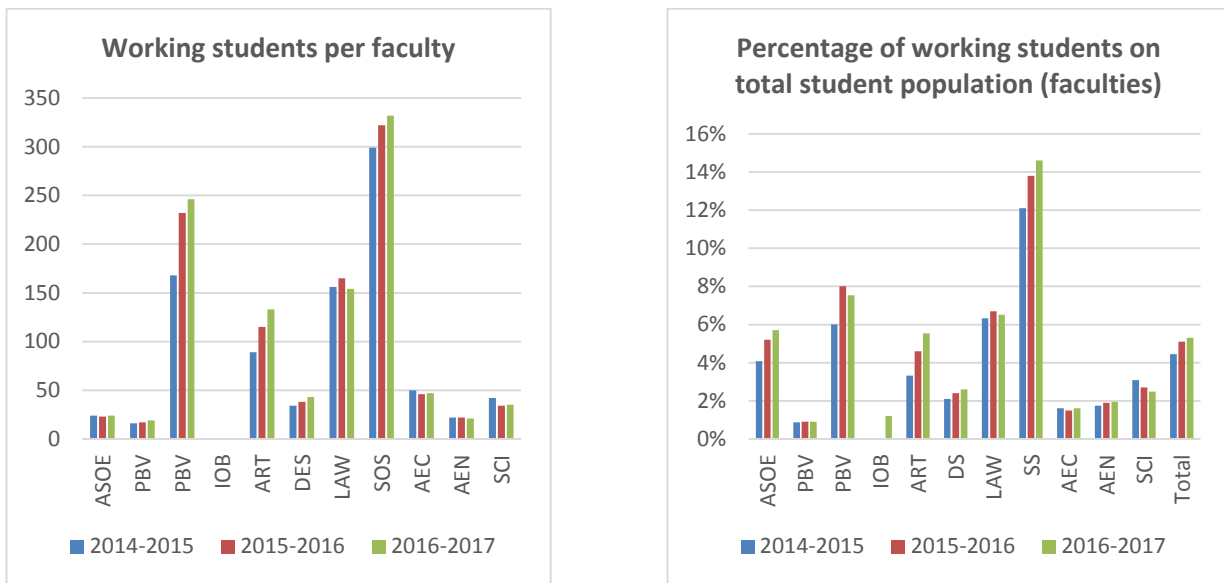
Each year, a larger number of working students enrol for study programmes at the University of Antwerp. In six years, the amount almost doubled. The same can be said of the relative importance of working students (see below: figure 1). In the last academic year (2016-2017) one in twenty students was registered as a working student. Their numbers also grow faster than those of traditional students, resulting in a higher share of the total student population. It is also important to note that around 13% of the working students are ‘first-time students’, who have never enrolled in a HEI previously.

Figure 1: Evolution: working students at the University of Antwerp



There are also large differences in-between faculties (see next page: figures 2 and 3). Preferences of working students and the amount of (flexible) programmes offered by the faculties are the main reasons for these large fluctuations. The faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (7.5%), the Faculty of Arts (5.5%), the Faculty of Law (6.5%) and the Faculty of Social Sciences (14.6%) stand out. They have a higher concentration of working students within the student population (more than 5%). All these faculties also have popular, flexible programmes for working students (Master of Nursing and Midwifery (MHS), Bachelor and Master of Philosophy (ART), Bachelor and Master of Laws (LAW) and Master of Instructional and Educational Sciences (SOS)). In some master programmes such as Nursing and Midwifery and Instructional and Educational Sciences working students outnumber regular students.

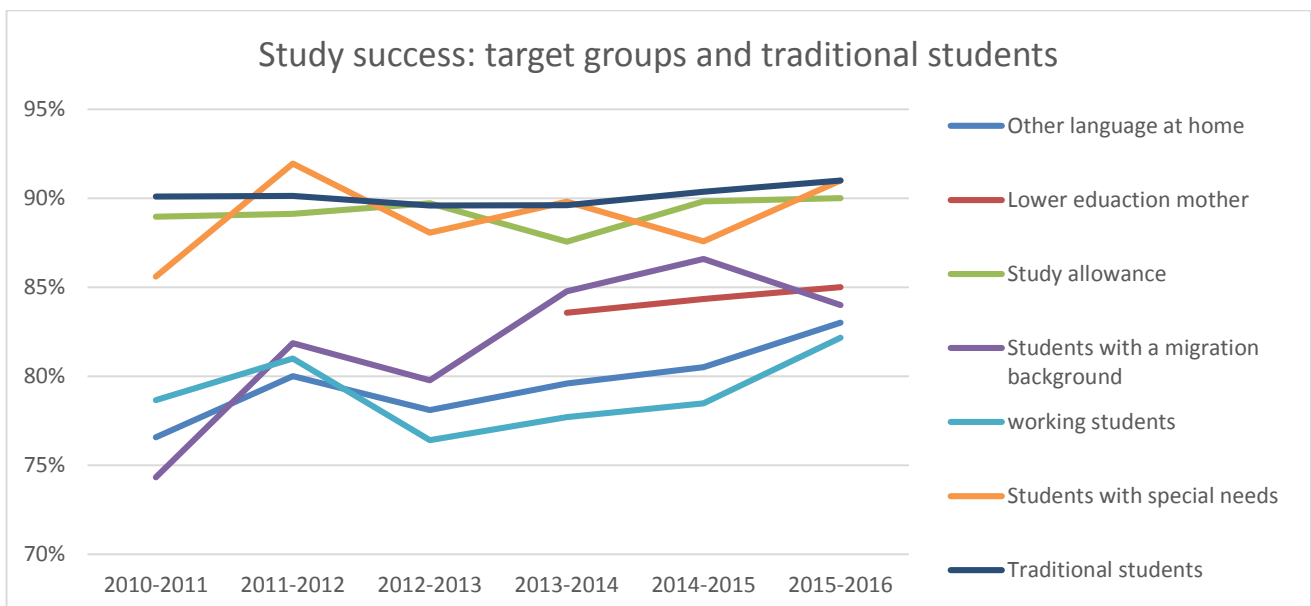
Figure 2 and 3: Working students per faculty



* ASOE: Antwerp School of Education; PBV: Pharmaceutical, Biomedical and Veterinary Sciences; MHS: Medicine and Health Sciences; IOB: Institute of Development Policy and Management; ART: Arts; DES: Design Sciences; LAW: Law; SOS: Social Sciences; AEC: Applied Economics; AEN: Applied Engineering and SCI: Sciences

There are also some statistically significant differences between regular students and other target groups. Working students have on average a lower study success rate (see below: figure 4). These differences are only statistically significant for bachelor and master programmes, not for bridging programmes. Study success is especially low for working students in bachelor programmes, but these figures are negatively skewed because of the high representation of working students in the Bachelor of Laws, which only has an average success rate of 50%. Working students are in general also older (on average 32 years old) and take up less credits each year than regular students but also less than other target groups. On average they take on 44 credits each year.

Figure 4: Study success of target groups compared with traditional students



5. Flexible programmes for working students and the Centre for Work and Studying (Centrum WeST)

In order to combine a study with a job and a personal life, the University of Antwerp created blended learning programmes for working students. 'Blended learning' is a very broad term with many possible interpretations. These pathways are often a mix of different teaching methods, additional provisions ... Each programme is tailor-made, which means that each one is different. These provisions for working students at the University of Antwerp will be discussed in the next paragraphs. Blended learning pathways are characterized by a reduced number of teaching hours and more independent studying. In addition, lectures are often grouped on specific days or evenings in order to increase attendance rates.

Blended learning not only varies between the programmes but even varies between the courses. Each programme is different due to its specific character. Every course has to be looked upon separately and be adjusted to its goals and needs.

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

In addition, some classes are 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 a time.

Since it is often difficult for working students to attend weekly 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 some cases, faculties chose to install additional contact moments during the evening which are only available for working students. Depending on the content or approach (practical or theoretical) one or more lecture moments are added to the programme. The simple fact of meeting other (working) students is a highly motivating factor. Working students experience through the contact moments that they are part of a group.

Centrum WeST coordinated in tandem with the various faculties the development process of these adjusted programmes. Almost every faculty has one or more working student programmes and in total there are 25 such programmes at the university.

Students who combine work and studies have multiple options. One of which is the Open University of the Netherlands (OUNL) which offers innovative distance learning. OUNL is a Dutch university which has study centres all over the Netherlands and Flanders. Each Flemish university has its own study centre. Study programmes are offered in distance learning and are modular. Students are able to decide at which pace they study, when they take exams ... In total 1.086 OUNL-students are registered at Flemish study centres and about one third at the study centre in Antwerp. They account for about 7% of all OUNL-students.

In general these students are older (39.5 years old) and take on a reduced study programme of 15 credits. In Flanders, psychology is the most popular field of study (35.6%). Increasing their chances in obtaining a new job is their main driving force (62%). Students choose for the OUNL for mainly two reasons. First of all

because the programmes are very flexible which enable students to set their own pace and secondly because the study programme and/or the form of studying is not offered anywhere else in Flanders. Working student programmes of the University of Antwerp and flexible programmes of the Open University of the Netherlands are complementary. They offer different pathways in obtaining a university degree. Both approaches are often focused upon when working students enquire about their possibilities to combine work and an academic study.

6. Characteristics and needs of working students: implications

It is important to note that the University of Antwerp actively chose to incorporate working student programmes (bachelor or master) in traditional bachelor and master programmes. That way the university can develop an inclusive approach. It also means that working students and other students follow most of the time the same lectures. Flexible programmes were adopted through blended learning and general exam and educational provisions were created to offer working students additional entitlements. Working students can also choose to enrol in a traditional bachelor or master programme which has not been adapted, but this often means that they have limited flexibility and entitlements.

Working students are a very heterogeneous group. They differ by age, work experience, intake, motivation ... from other students but there are also large within group differences. In order to have a better view on their specific needs the Centre for Work and Studying had a closer look at their profile. In 2014, a survey was set up to discover underlying differences within the group. It was filled in by 167 working students.

In the survey we looked at the group as a whole but also matched each time two distinct subgroups: (1) working students who enrolled in working student programmes and those who enrolled in traditional programmes, (2) working students who already obtained a master's degree and those who didn't and (3) working students with a high amount of work experience compared to those with less work experience.

Several statistically significant results were found. Other descriptive statistics also gave valuable information on the characteristics, motivation and needs of working students. The top two reasons which working students mentioned for enrolling at the University of Antwerp were related to practical reasons (work-home distance) and to the availability of adjusted, flexible programmes for working students. Expanding their knowledge is in most cases their highest priority, new job opportunities were scored less highly.

Several questions closed in on the needs of working students. They welcome recordings of lectures and any form of blended learning with additional contact moments during the evening. Distance learning is mainly disregarded as insufficient (64.1%). Less compulsory attendance and more financial support, even though at least 57% of the respondents used one form or the other, were scored less highly.

A majority also indicated that they were well supported by their family and friends (78%). The grade related to work support was lower (48% positive feedback). Half of the respondents (44.2%) indicated that the combination work and studies is too intensive, while only 6.7% claim that the level of difficulty of the programme is too high. Working students apply different study methods which focus on comprehension, reproduction and a critical attitude. They also try to relate their studies to their (work) situation, memorization as a study method is less popular.

When comparing different subgroups we found statistically significant results concerning the choice of programme, prior education and work experience. Working students in flexible programmes put higher

emphasis on interaction/contact with other student and teachers as well as additional provisions. Proximity (distance work-home) is less of an issue. They also follow classes more often and have stronger ties with fellow students.

We also found statistically significant differences between students who already obtained a master's degree and those who haven't. Students without a master's degree are driven more by new job opportunities or better working conditions. They also choose more often for flexible programmes, have more issues with finding the right study method and use summaries more often. On the other hand, working students with a master's degree feel better prepared for the combination work and studies.

Finally, we also looked at differences between working students with more or less than five years of work experience. Working students with more experience choose for programmes which give them more job opportunities outside of their current sector. They also prefer memorizing different learning materials to other study methods.

These results are in line with previous research (see section 2) but also shows how diverse the group of working students is. It is therefore important to develop tailor-made solutions and programmes otherwise they will miss their target.

These kind of policies will not only enable working students to combine work and studies but also modernize university programmes. Modifications such as blended learning, recordings ... help exploit the transformational benefits of ICTs and other new technologies to enrich teaching, improve learning experiences and support personalised learning. These benefits will not be limited to a single group: working students. They can easily be applied to all students because of the inclusive approach of the University of Antwerp.

They can also broaden access to higher education, increase participation and completion in higher education for (other) groups in society that are currently under-represented. It will also have a positive effect on dropout rates and the time it takes to complete a degree. Working students, adult learners, mature students ... will be able to obtain new qualifications, up-skilling or re-skilling for employment, personal growth, or studying just for pleasure.

7. Conclusion

Although lifelong learning has been featuring on the educational agenda for years most European countries are a long way from realizing the 15% participation target of the European Commission. In order to guarantee an open educational market to working students the institutional strategy needs to focus on an innovative and successful transition to technology based teaching and learning.

In the twenty-first century European universities are faced with complex social and economic challenges that are generated mainly by the effects of globalisation, demographic changes and technological innovations. The resulting need for constant adaptation can only be met by universities who engage their students in lifelong learning to deal with local developments within a wider European perspective. National strategies should be developed within a European dialogue among universities which are willing to contribute to a culture of lifelong learning that meets diversified learner needs.

In recent years working students have become a specific target group, both for national governments (e.g. the decree on the financing of Flemish higher education) and for universities themselves. Changes in the landscape of higher education in recent years have created more possibilities for this target group. So European universities have adopted a very flexible system for full-time and part-time study that entails some essential LLL characteristics:

- recognition procedures for prior learning (both formal and informal)
 - Students can make use of recognition procedures for formal and non-formal prior learning. By way of these procedures students can be exempted from one or more courses of their degree programme.
- bridging programmes for access to master degrees
 - Universities can offer so-called 'bridging programmes' for bachelors graduated at vocationally oriented institutions who want to supplement their study with a master's degree.
- flexible study progress
 - Students can compose quite freely study programmes ranging from 3 to 66 ECTS per academic year. Students can obtain academic degrees at their own pace.

Only by building flexible and inclusive learning pathways within an educational landscape that is rapidly but successfully transformed by technology the university can fulfil its promise to a society that gives priority to upgrading the skills and knowledge of all its citizens.

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