

TOWARDS FLEXIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Thursday 22 January 2009

Title and Presenter:

Virtual Bridges for Improved Student Performance: the case of the MA in Legislative Studies Online

Cristina Leston-Bandeira

Sub Theme & Paper Type:

Flexible Delivery– Presentation

Abstract:

This paper focuses on the case study of the MA in Legislative Studies Online (MALSO) to show how a teaching approach supported by flexible delivery has led to improved student performance. MALSO is a postgraduate masters course entirely taught online from the Department of Politics and International Studies and is now in its sixth year of delivery. The course was taught via the virtual learning environment (VLE) Merlin for five years and is now taught via eBridge. The course is highly specialised and is particularly aimed at students who work full time in or with a parliamentary institution. The same course had been taught on campus for over a decade but with very small numbers. The opportunity to offer the course online has not only allowed to expand on student numbers but also to improve on student performance.

The paper will show that this is due to the ability of recruiting better students who do not have to leave work to take the course, but also the ability to fit study around work. The paper will show that the flexibility of time and space offered by online delivery has allowed the use of teaching tasks that students adopt and develop according to their own work reality and interests. The programme has recognition from the ESRC (an indicator of solid methodological and academic quality at MA level) and has resulted not only on excellent feedback from students, but also very good student performance with some of the final dissertations being of publishable standard. This paper should be of interest to any staff wanting to develop online teaching. Some of the strategies involved in the teaching of this MA can also be applied in modules supported by a blended learning approach. The paper will also address the challenges raised by the *change* to a different VLE whilst trying to keep the *same* approach to teaching.