



Reviewing (traces of) European Virtual Campuses

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Towards a New Era of Virtual Campus Education
Paper accepted for OEB Conference 2009, Berlin

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Introduction

This paper reflects the results we reached in the framework of the Re.ViCa project. The Re.ViCa project runned from October 2007 until October 2009. Re.ViCa has been making an inventory and carrying out a systematic review of cross-institutional Virtual Campus initiatives of the past decade within higher education at European, national and regional levels. The main objective of the Re.ViCa project is to identify relevant parameters and success factors for evaluating and comparing Virtual Campuses, based on thorough research and expert input. The Re.ViCa Consortium organises in-depth discussions with experts in order to incorporate the input of different interest groups.

(<http://revica.europace.org>)

What is a Virtual Campus Nowadays?

Starting a project around a relatively new concept, like a Virtual Campus, starts inevitably with the question, what do we understand under the term Virtual Campus?

Although the phrase ‘Virtual Campus’ is an important concept in the field of education, we didn’t find an existing theoretical framework for it. We noticed that there wasn’t even a clear definition of the term Virtual Campus. Literature reviews, interviews with experts and discussions with stakeholders learned us that when people hear the term Virtual Campus, they think of virtual places like Second Life or other game-based educational settings, some see a Virtual Campus as a virtual area where students and teachers come together and collaborate, others see it as a virtual collaboration between different Higher Education Institutions. Even within one Higher Education Institution often no single “Virtual Campus” model is used. Different names are given to similar activities in different countries and in some countries it has fallen out of use altogether or has never been really used. The ReViCa Handbook gives an overview of the different meanings of the term Virtual Campuses in different European Countries.

Research Approach

The first thing researchers need to do is to narrow down their research area and try to focus on a specific, small and controllable topic. In the frame of the Re.ViCa Project we did the complete opposite and tried to look at Virtual Campuses in the broadest sense. We started to define a Virtual Campus as a large-scale elearning initiative, a working definition that involves large scale initiatives which are recognizable on the list of characteristics. The list of characteristics is available on http://www.virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/Virtual_campus.

To identify large-scale initiatives in Europe and the rest of the world, we collected all notable elearning initiatives. There was much internal discussion on the word “Notable” – which we interpret as that a well-known person, agency or project report “noted” the initiative – and as such we dutifully scoured the main sources of such “notes” including UNESCO, OBHE, COL, and conference proceedings.

Based on these definitions the research team started building up an inventory of Virtual Campuses around the globe. The information we gathered contained both in the Re.ViCa country reports where we looked at how Virtual Campuses are organised on a national basis as well as the information we gathered on individual Virtual Campuses of interest reported in the extensive list of programmes contained in the Re.ViCa wiki. In this work we used an approach to categorization, which allows us to categorise Virtual Campuses along 6 axes; the UNESCO categorisation of initiative, the political level of the initiative (national? multinational? international?), the existence of the initiative (still in operation? ceased?), the internal scale of initiative (notable? major? giant?, the academic level of the initiative and whether or not it is a dedicated distance education initiative.

Results

We have identified around 170 Notable elearning initiatives in Europe (EEZ), with some 20 more existing as EU projects past or present. In the Rest of the World there are 360 Notable initiatives. Thus we now have more than 500 Notable elearning Programmes across the world. There are currently 86 countries with one or more Programmes. And the list is still growing. Most institutions have a short entry in English, containing general information about the institution and the elearning approach. The list of programmes together with all results are published on a wiki (<http://www.virtualcampuses.eu>) which was officially launched and opened for the public in June 2009. We choose to use a wiki, to create a dynamic database.

We described all our results, based on the inventory in the the Re.ViCa Handbook, which is also available on our Re.ViCa website. We start the handbook with a short historical overview of the term Virtual Campus, followed by the theoretical framework we created to define the concept. Chapter 3 explains in more detail, our categorization approach.

Chapter 4 gives a “helicopter view” of the world of Virtual Campuses. Given the resources available to us, this chapter provides a good overview of how Virtual Campuses around the world are faring in today’s climate and can be used to foster collaboration, stimulate debate and share experience amongst those interested in the Virtual Campus phenomenon. We also tried to identify whether there were certain core and identifiable characteristics or environmental factors that made European Virtual Campuses somehow different from those in other parts of the world.

To the end we provide the reader with a list of Critical Success Factors that enable European Virtual Campuses or institutions interested to setting up a Virtual Campus to maximise their performance.

Finally there is a glossary of terms and a short section with some suggestions for further reading. All sections will give numerous references to related material including on the wiki.

You can also find all this information and more on the Re.ViCa wiki:

<http://www.virtualcampuses.eu>

The Re.ViCa wiki is probably already one of the largest repositories on the topic of Virtual Campus available today and next to the impressive Inventory of Notable elearning initiatives, it contains

information about interesting programmes, initiatives, projects and leading institutions as well as a rapidly growing series of country reports describing Virtual Campuses around the world. During the presentation we will give the audience a glimpse of the trends we found in the elearning world and lessons learnt.

Our hope is that our analysis can in turn lead to a more informed understanding of the virtual campus phenomenon in Europe, helping researchers and policy-makers understand what makes them successful as well as how to avoid some of the mistakes of the past. We hope we initiate a discussion about regional influences and factors that can have a bearing in more general terms on the development of a virtual campus.

We look forward to further research in this field and opportunities to discuss the nature and existence of virtual campuses with other researchers in the field.

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