



Reviewing (traces of) European Virtual Campuses

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Authors: *Sally Reynolds, Nikki Cortoos*

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Contributors to the document
(incl. quality review):

Contact name: Bieke Schreurs

Organisation: EuroPACE ivzw

Address: Kapeldreef 62, B-3001 Heverlee, Belgium

Telephone: +32 16 32 78 15

Email: bieke.schreurs@europace.be

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REPORT COMPARISON EUROPEAN VERSUS NON-EUROPEAN VIRTUAL CAMPUS INITIATIVES: FACTORS AND ISSUES INFLUENCING VIRTUAL CAMPUSES IN DIFFERENT REGIONS

FACTORS AND ISSUES INFLUENCING VIRTUAL CAMPUSES IN DIFFERENT REGIONS

One of the starting points for the Re.ViCa team was to try 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. While in our case the focus was on Europe, the same question could be raised in respect to any other region – are there regional conditions that make virtual campuses in Africa somewhat unique and different from those in, for example, Asia? Although generalisations are difficult to make in this respect, one factor that does seem to have made a difference in the past relates to financial resources, and it was clear to us that in overall terms, there is more virtual campus activity in countries with a higher GDP. Necessary technical infrastructure alone calls for significant investment, and while several of the large so-called mega universities were set up in developing countries with a specific mandate to address the needs of poorer learners, many of these still relied on traditional distance teaching methodology, at least up until recently. However, even this may be changing as other factors – including developing countries' increased desire to compete, and a returning diaspora with know-how and resources – are having an impact on the level of virtual campus activity we witnessed in a large number of so-called developing countries.

Our general conclusion following the work carried out with respect to Europe is that while certain regional conditions do have an impact, and these can be important to take into account when analysing how well virtual campuses succeed in meeting their own and stakeholders' objectives, no clear picture of a distinctly "European" virtual campus has emerged. Virtual campuses in Europe are subject to much the same constraints and opportunities as those in other parts of the world. However there is still value in describing certain conditions that pertain to the countries of the EEZ that we consider have had, and continue to have, a certain influence on the set-up and operation of virtual campuses in this region. Many of these are not uniquely European; however they do have a bearing on the development of virtual campuses in this region.

THE IMPACT OF BOLOGNA

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the Bologna Process in Europe. Up to the end of the 20th Century, European universities operated on a largely independent basis, with the only real policy impetus coming at national level. This all changed with the introduction of the Bologna Process which began in 1998 with the Sorbonne Joint Declaration on Harmonisation of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System. The Bologna Process is the product of a series of meetings of European ministers responsible for higher education at which policy decisions have been taken in order to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 which includes cross-border recognition of awards and overall transparency of the European higher education systems.

A recent report written by David Crosier and Philippe Ruffio and published by the EACEA shows that in general terms the Bologna process is progressing well in Europe, with universities well on track to achieve the central objective of creating the European Higher Education Area by 2010.¹ According to this report, there are now 46 signatory countries of the Bologna Process, and significant reforms have brought about far greater compatibility of the different national European education degree structures. The various tools which are helping to achieve a common European education area, like the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), Diploma Supplement, and National Qualifications Frameworks, are increasingly common. Gaps do exist in certain fields of study; however convergence in the models for the first two academic cycles (bachelor's and master's) is clearly taking place.

Although there are no references within Bologna to the topic of the virtual campus, it is clear that a policy which favours transparency, cross-border collaboration and a shared credit transfer system is conducive to the development of virtual campus initiatives, and certainly being able to access a common credit transfer system like ECTS does facilitate collaborative models of virtual campus (in much the same way as the North American model, where credits earned in one university in Canada for example may be recognised by US universities). A lack of suitable credit transfer arrangements is certainly a significant barrier, as witnessed by the failure of the UK's Open University to successfully launch a successful branch in the USA; the failure is partially blamed on the lack of a suitable credit transfer system, by Katrina A. Meyer² among others. As Bologna becomes more and more entrenched in the European higher education sector, the barriers to cross-border collaboration among European universities diminish, European initiatives are expected to thrive and overall European mobility is expected to be further enhanced.

THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE PROGRAMMES OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

While members of the higher education community in the EEZ differ in terms of when they first remember using the term *virtual campus*, one thing they generally agree upon is that the term really came into vogue when the European Commission started to use it in respect to their various funding programmes. For example, in the European eLearning Programme launched in 2001,³ one of the four action lines proposed was dedicated to the promotion of European Virtual Campuses and so consortia anxious to be successful in their bids also used the term. The European Union has played a vital role in encouraging universities to adopt a more international approach – although here the focus is on collaborating with other institutions *within* the European Union, rather than globally. However this aspect of how European universities organise themselves should not be underestimated. From programmes such as Erasmus encouraging and supporting student mobility, through to the various initiatives aimed at fostering European collaboration in terms of specific research activities and the promotion of networks of excellence in the European academic environment, virtual campus initiatives in specific content areas involving international cooperation among existing HE providers are now very common in Europe. Despite the fact that many of these first emerged as a result of European funding, for many the degree to which common objectives and a strong demand for such collaboration exists has meant that they have gone on to be sustainable in their own right, sometimes replacing the more traditional types of collaboration found for instance in summer schools run by research consortia.

European programmes have also led to increased networking within the European higher education community, and nowadays it is rare to find any European university faculty that is not involved in some form of cross-border collaboration brought about in effect by European intervention. This has happened at a time when the use of English as a lingua franca among staff in European universities has greatly increased, and has resulted in overcoming linguistic barriers previously encountered in this regard.

THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL INITIATIVES WITHIN THE EEZ

The European Economic Zone has had its fair share of national initiatives aimed at promoting the uptake of ICT in higher education. These have varied a great deal but in broad terms have taken one of the following approaches:

- Creation of a single national VC institution by bringing together several existing providers, e.g., Estonian e-University, Dutch Digital Campus, Finnish Virtual Campus, UK e-University – this can be either a small-scale initiative involving just a small select group of universities or a country-wide effort.
- The creation of a totally new institution supported by a national government, like UOC in Catalonia.
- Promotion of ICT within individual existing universities through the provision of funding for specific programmes in universities utilising ICT, e.g., in Norway where the national Norway Opening Universities (NOU) initiative supports Norwegian institutions of higher education by funding projects for developing ICT-supported flexible learning and distance education courses through a yearly application process. There is a similar process in place in other countries, such as the programmes offered by SURF in the Netherlands. These funding programmes go beyond the typical network support services (NRENS) run by agencies like JANET in the UK, HEAnet in Ireland, and the UNINETT group in Norway.
- Setting up of a portal which simply serves up course offerings from existing institutions, albeit through what can be seen as a nationally validated service offer. Typical of this type of national initiative in the Bulgarian Virtual University.

While many of the national initiatives which aimed towards a single institution have failed to have any major impact (and some, like the e-University in the UK and the Danish Virtual University, have completely disappeared) their longer term impact has been a raising of awareness of the notion of a virtual campus and a general acceptance of the value of online learning in the overall palette of options for the higher education student – helping online learning generally to “come of age” so to speak. While these types of national initiatives have been popular in Europe, they are not confined to this region and can also be found in South America and other parts of the world.

Although there is some evidence (in Europe at least) that national initiatives aimed at the creation of a single institution are no longer as popular as they were several years ago, the need for financial support to promote and foster online learning opportunities generally in the higher education sector continues to be met by national initiatives (funding programmes) which generally complement European programmes in this respect. The current economic climate also mitigates against the whole idea of setting up brand-new, and by definition, expensive institutions, and it is more likely in Europe at least that what we will see in the future will be far more incrementalist.

THE ROLE OF OPEN UNIVERSITIES IN THE EEZ

A number of European open universities have formed the bedrock of the virtual campus movement and continue to offer expertise and leadership in this area, providing other institutions with new ideas and in many cases piloting services and processes from which others learn. Some were early adopters – e.g., the Open University, UK and the Dutch Open University – while others like the Universidade Aberta only really launched itself as an online virtual campus in 2006. The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) is a particular case in point, as it was set up in 1997 as an online or virtual university from the start, and so has been particularly innovative and market driven.

The impact of open universities does vary considerably from country to country and there is some evidence that language has some bearing on this. In the UK for example, there are now centres of excellence and specialised resources aimed at fostering and supporting virtual campus activities in large numbers of traditional universities; these are no longer to be found only in the Open University. However in countries where the national language is spoken by far fewer people, e.g., the Netherlands, the open universities have served as magnets for much of the leading-edge, technology-enhanced learning development in their linguistic sector. Whether this has a positive or negative impact on the growth of virtual campuses in a country remains to be seen.

THE EXTENT TO WHICH HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE IS BASED ON A PUBLIC MODEL

Few researchers would argue with the view that in the European Economic Zone, the dominant higher education model is a public one, with private universities playing a far smaller role than in other parts of the world (e.g., Brazil or the USA). Therefore it is hardly surprising that the ratio of private European virtual campuses to public ones is also quite low. Private higher education is often viewed with suspicion in European countries (even those where in fact it is not uncommon) and with only a few notable exceptions, the same is true of private virtual campus initiatives. There is some evidence that this is changing and the emergence of successful institutions like Hibernia College in Ireland is certainly raising awareness as to the potential of such models. Hibernia is also interesting in that while it is a private institution, a significant proportion of its income comes directly from the public purse in the form of payments for teacher training made by the UK government.

European Higher education is also changing a great deal in this respect and the old distinctions between what constitutes private (understood to mean “for-profit”) and public (understood to mean “not-for-profit”) are often no longer useful when it comes to making distinctions in Europe. Given the extent to which public universities are increasingly required to raise their own resources through the provision of various types of services, many of them have adopted highly commercial strategies in their promotion and operation of certain services, which has included in some cases, courses and educational services offered online in some form of virtual campus arrangement. In the UK for example, many of the public universities, including the leading ones, behave in a very commercial way (e.g., London Business School), with entrepreneurial activity and high salaries for key professors and senior staff.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have tried to provide not only an overview of key virtual campus initiatives around the globe, but also initiated a discussion about regional influences and factors that can have a bearing in more general terms on the development of a virtual campus. Our latter analysis is limited somewhat to factors that have had a specific impact on developments in Europe, in keeping with the context of the Re.ViCa project. Our hope is that such analysis can in turn lead to a more informed understanding of the virtual campus phenomenon in Europe, helping researchers and policymakers understand what makes them successful as well as how to avoid some of the mistakes of the past. As stated at the outset, our ability to provide a comprehensive list of virtual campuses worldwide is limited by many factors, not the least of which is the sheer richness of the available information and the degree to which virtual campuses around the world are flourishing. 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.

¹ EACEA, "Higher Education in Europe 2009: Developments in the Bologna Process", 2009, http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/099EN.pdf.

² Meyers, K.A., "The Closing of the U.S. Open University", *EDUCAUSE Quarterly* 29: 2 (2006), 5, <http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Quarterly/EDUCAUSEQuarterlyMagazineVolum/TheClosingoftheUSOpenUniversit/157394>.

³ EACEA, "eLearning Programme: a programme for the effective integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education and training systems in Europe (2004 - 2006)", 2007, http://ec.europa.eu/education/archive/elearning/programme_en.html.