



## **Reviewing (traces of) European Virtual Campuses**

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## *Report Definition of Virtual Campuses*

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## What is a Virtual Campus? A Definition

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Although the phrase virtual campus is an important concept in the field of education, there is no generally accepted theoretical framework for it among researchers. In this chapter we search for a contemporary definition. To do this we have gathered definitions from more than 10 European Countries. Based on these results, we have developed a theoretical framework for the phrase virtual campus.

### Definitions of Virtual Campuses

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#### Definitions in the Context of the European Commission

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When defining a *virtual campus*, the European Commission stresses cooperation among higher education institutions in the field of e-learning, especially regarding joint curricula development by several universities. Indicators may include agreements for the evaluation, validation and recognition of acquired competences, subject to national procedures; large-scale experiments of virtual mobility in addition to physical mobility; and development of innovative dual mode curricula, based on both traditional and online learning methods.<sup>1</sup>

This broad definition involves many issues from partnerships between traditional and/or distance universities and other higher education providers, with a view to offering joint certifications (for undergraduate and/or postgraduate levels) and cooperation with learning-support services. This might also include collaborative activities in strategic areas of education or research through cooperation involving researchers, academics, students, management, administrators and technical personnel. At the e-learningeuropa.info portal, *virtual campus* is defined as “Part of a university or faculty that offers educational facilities at any time or, in theory, any place, by Internet”.<sup>2</sup>

At a European Commission consultation workshop held in Brussels on 23rd November 2004, entitled “The ‘e’ for our universities – virtual campus”, one of the working groups proposed three definitions emphasising different aspects of a virtual campus. These were the:

- Collaboration perspective: The term “virtual campus” denotes ICT-based collaboration of different partners supporting both, learning offers and research in a distributed setting.
- Enterprise (economic) perspective: The term “virtual campus” denotes an ICT-based distributed learning and research enterprise.
- Networked organisation perspective: The term “virtual campus” denotes an environment, which augments and/or integrates learning and research services offered by different partners.<sup>3</sup>

SOCRATES Thematic Network: Enhancing Engineering Education in Europe – E4 Survey of Virtual Campus and Virtual University Activities in Europe<sup>4</sup> takes a holistic approach and defines *virtual campus* as a broad conceptual framework for tools, services and facilities for students, faculty and staff. The word *campus* is used to denote the environment for the people who study, carry out research, and/or work at the university. These elements include e-learning, research activities, administrative services and other functions, e.g., complementing and supporting operations on the physical university campus.

## Definitions in the Context of the Different Countries Within the European Community

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### United Kingdom

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In the UK, the phrase *virtual campus* is still used, but not as widely as it was a few years ago. At least four UK universities still use the phrase within the boundaries of the range of meanings we regard as acceptable for a virtual campus in key locations on their web material – such as [University of Lincoln](#), [University of London External System](#), [Oxford Brookes University](#) and the [Robert Gordon University](#). Others use the phrase within the text describing their operations, such as the [University of Ulster](#) with its [Campus One](#) virtual campus. In addition to universities, several colleges use the phrase – including City of Bristol College, Glenrothes College, North West Institute of Further and Higher Education (Londonderry), and St Helens College. Finally various consortia providers use the phrase, including [UNIGIS](#), Western Colleges Consortium and Leeds Teacher Training (SCITT).

It is true that several high-profile universities – such as [Sheffield Hallam University](#) – do not use the phrase now, even though they demonstrate substantial e-learning activity. Others, such as the former [NHS University](#), do not use the phrase because they are now inactive – but interestingly, several medical schools including King’s College Medical School still use the phrase.

There are some synonyms of the phrase that are also used – including the [Global Campus](#) at [Middlesex University](#), or the phrase *virtual* on its own, as at Brookes Virtual (from Oxford Brookes University).

Going beyond the remit of Re.ViCa, several private providers and charitable organisations use the phrase, including [Kaplan Open Learning](#) (an affiliate college of the University of Essex) and the Prisoners Education Trust.

However, to confuse the situation in the UK, there are a number of uses that are out of scope – including for “virtual tours” of a physical campus and for various experiments with Second Life including [University of East London](#) (which also has a virtual campus in our sense – [UELConnect](#) – though not called virtual).

### Belgium

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In Belgium the expression *virtual campus* was initially used for individual initiatives of universities, schools and companies that wanted to attract attention. Examples were campuses from universities or schools that were called virtual campuses, like the [Virtual Campus of the University of Liège](#), or the [Campus Virtuel en Gestion](#), created by the three departments of management from the University of Liège, [Université Libre de Bruxelles](#) and [Université Catholique de Louvain](#).

At the University of Leuven they use the term *multi-campus* to describe virtual campus activities. Online networks of student groups and/or teaching staff emerge in learning communities or communities of practice. Virtual initiatives – joint learning materials, joint learning activities, joint courses – all play a vital part in this arrangement. Multi-campus education is also about a range of virtual support activities with regard to real physical mobility.

### France

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In France several definitions of *virtual campus* exist. Very close to the definition of *virtual campus*, the *université virtuelle* embraces content, management tools and course design tools. The virtual university acts as an in-between to link students to the broad training offerings that will be customised/tailored as they compose their own training programmes.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to what is suggested by its name, in France it is felt that a virtual university belongs more to the business world than to higher education. The virtual university acts as a bridge to link the employee and the training offerings. It provides information on courses, and enables employees to set their own individualised programmes according to their personal preferences. In a different project in France, the virtual campus is defined as a web site aimed at a learning community in order to offer educational resources as well as communication and collaboration tools. Some of these web

sites use a graphic metaphor symbolising a real campus, with its own cafeteria, library, classrooms, etc.

A virtual campus can be considered as equivalent to a *campus numérique* (digital campus) but is aimed rather towards a working community. A *campus numérique* is a modularised system of training that meets higher education needs and combines multimedia resources, interactivity of digital environments and human administrative supervision – all of which are necessary to learn and subsequently have the learning recognised. A *campus numérique* is also a system in distance and open training (FOAD: Formation Ouverte et à Distance), which requires multimedia resources, use of ICT, and human resources that are aimed at coordinating learning paths from an administrative perspective.

A further term is the *université numérique (en region)* (UNR). This type of a regional, digital university binds together the government, the regional authorities, the universities and other organisations in a geographical “contract of objectives” signed for two years. UNR projects have encouraged development of digital services and contributed to the planning of digital services in French territories. <sup>6</sup>

## Finland

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The [Finnish Virtual University](#), one of the major higher education projects of Finnish information society activities in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, defines its own portal as a *virtual campus* (*virtuaalikampus*) for students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff working in online education. The portal links together the virtual activities of the Finnish universities and provides services that can be used by all participants.

The approach taken by Finnish higher education society nowadays is a logical continuation of the SOCRATES Thematic Network, Enhancing Engineering Education in Europe – E4 Survey of Virtual Campus and Virtual University Activities in Europe, following the ideas of the National Information Society Policy for 2007–2011 (the [Ubiquitous Information Society Advisory Board](#)); the key processes and interaction are largely based on the utilisation of electronic communications and information technology. ICT applications contribute to service provision and availability, and create new operating models and new skills. The key elements are communications infrastructure, user-oriented services, development of digital contents, promotion of innovation activities and remote “telework”, and development of science infrastructure. The use of ICT in teaching and studying is promoted. It is not seen as a separate target area as such, but is rather integrated into all processes of education and development of a new electronic learning environment. This approach is often described as an *ICT-supported university* (*TVT-tuettu yliopisto*) or as “digitalisation of the university” in university contexts.<sup>7</sup>

## Netherlands

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In the Netherlands the term *virtual campus* is a synonym of *digital campus*, which is often referred to as a “digital working and learning environment”. This working and learning environment is seen from an educational perspective (not from a business point of view), and includes digital components (but is not solely an electronic environment). This definition comes close to what we nowadays call *blended learning*. A virtual campus encloses human – and technological – activities for educational purposes.<sup>8</sup>

When a closer look is taken at the definition of a *virtual campus* from a business perspective, it matches almost everything that is related to e-learning in general. Thus a virtual campus is an environment in which individuals can attend practical training sessions anyplace, anytime, anywhere – with just-in-time support, various learning material formats (audio, video, written), and learning at one’s own pace.<sup>9</sup>

It is remarkable that the term *virtual campus* is not used very much in the field of higher education in the Netherlands. Although all universities have a virtual environment to offer, most of

the time they use the expression *electronic learning environment* or *portal* to describe virtual support services. It appears that the term *virtual campus* is outdated.

## Italy

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In Italy the expression *virtual campus* (*campus virtuale*) should in theory describe academic, university-based activities (based on the term *campus*). In fact, it has been used since the late 1990s to describe web-based training platforms as a whole. This definition was originally rather vague, as it was applied in several different contexts: in universities' specific e-learning initiatives (in the context of traditional didactic activities); in specific higher education research projects; in secondary schools; and in public administration and private company initiatives. The term described simple sites which collected information on a specific topic. Below, we review some examples of the original use of the term *virtual campus* in Italy.

[Avicenna Virtual Campus](#) was developed in order to allow transmission and sharing of knowledge and best practices among universities and education companies. [Campus Virtuale](#) (1) is an e-learning platform for computer science and information science vocational training, launched in the year 2000 by a private company in Italy's Campania region. [Campus Virtuale](#) (2) is similar in terms of didactic objectives; it is another e-learning platform for informatics and computer training, developed and hosted by a consortium of companies in Regione Puglia. [Il Campus Virtuale](#) is the Virtual Campus of Università Bocconi, a traditional private university. Finally, [Campus Virtuale UNCEM](#) is a knowledge base which collects information useful to mountain communities' local bodies.

The use of the *campus virtuale* expression was reduced by the introduction of the term *telematic university*, further to the approval of a law on the restructuring of the university didactic rule (affecting university autonomy); this led all the university e-learning initiatives to adopt this new terminology. At the moment, the most correct translation for the English *virtual campus* is certainly *università telematica* (telematic university), an expression which includes the university connotation of *campus* and the computer-based and distance availability implications of *virtual*. These telematic (state and non-state) universities can establish and implement distance courses using computer-based and telematic technologies, in accordance with the technical requirements indicated by the Moratti-Stanca Decree. The distance education courses must be characterised, as stated in the decree: by the use of web-based connections for the use of training materials and the development of educational activities based on interactivity with teachers-tutors and with other students; by the use of PC; and by the continuous monitoring of learning progress according to the selective and rigorous criteria envisaged to assure the quality of the courses and the reliability of the educational offer.<sup>10</sup>

## The Boundary Approach for the Concept of Virtual Campus

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Although the phrase *virtual campus* is an important concept in the field of education, there is no theoretical framework for it. This section focuses on the development of such a theoretical framework. Similar to the work that Stoof, Martens, Van Merriënboer & Bastiaens<sup>11</sup> undertook for the concept of competence, we propose the boundary approach for virtual campuses, an aid to support e-learning stakeholders in thinking about the virtual campus concept. Here the notion of the virtual campus is explored by focusing on its dimensions. This implies that the quest for one absolute definition of *virtual campus* is abandoned, and that instead definitions are being valued against their degree of viability.

Depending on the context, the target group, the different goals and the technology involved, a definition of *virtual campus* can be formulated. The partners in the Re.ViCa project group do not want to give one single definition of the concept of the virtual campus. Since there will never be one right answer on the question what a virtual campus is, we suggest the use of a conceptual representation aid to discuss the concept. Figure 1 shows the concept as an amoeba-like form. The amoeba represents the virtual campus as a limited and demarcated concept, which is expressed by drawing its boundary. The boundary is being shaped by two opposing forces, here visualised as

arrows (based on the work of Stoof et al – see in particular page 352 of their paper). From inside the figure, forces expand the boundary. This process is labelled the “inside-out approach” to the concept of the virtual campus.

These are dimensions that define and construct the concept. In Re.ViCa we aim to take *virtual campus* as synonymous with *large-scale e-learning initiative*. This “large-scale e-learning initiative” is the inside-out dimension.

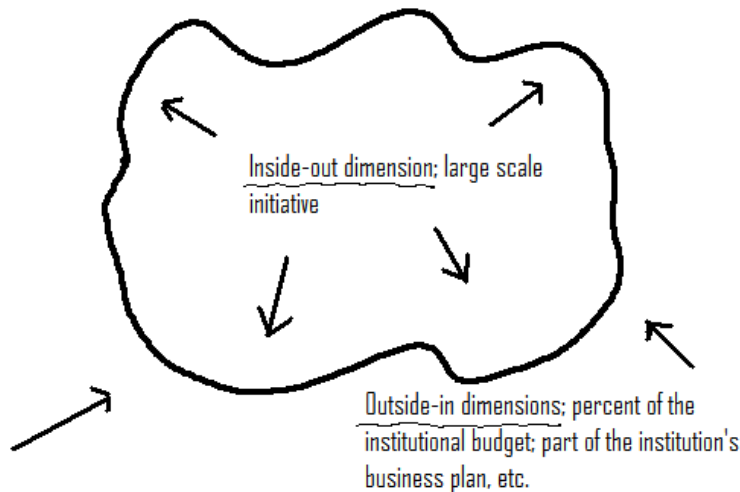


Fig. 1 Concept of a virtual campus as an amoeba-like form

On the other hand, the forces from outside the figure reduce the boundary. This outside-in approach focuses on the selection of terms that best express the intended meaning of the *virtual campus* (so it clarifies the relationships).

In Re.ViCa we avoid the issue of giving distance e-learning a privileged position over campus-based e-learning, but this begs the question of what is *large scale*? Here we examine some indicators. These are all outside-in dimensions, which suggest *large scale* – note that not all of them need to be satisfied.

An e-learning initiative in a university – or consortium of universities – is *major* if it has many (but not necessarily all) of the following characteristics:

- It requires at least 1% of the institutional budget (this is a rule of thumb taken from Activity Based Costing theory, i.e. that it is pointless to track any initiatives below that level of expenditure).
- The person responsible (as the majority proportion of his/her job) for leading that initiative has a rank and salary at least equivalent to that of a university full professor at head of department level, or equivalent rank of administrative or technical staff (usually an assistant director) – and ideally that of dean or full director.
- There is a specific department to manage and deliver the initiative with a degree of autonomy from mainstream IT, library, pedagogic or quality structures.
- Progress of the initiative is overseen by a steering group chaired by one of the most senior managers in the institution (in UK terms, a pro vice-chancellor).
- The initiative is part of the institution’s business plan and is not totally dependent on any particular externally funded project.
- There are strategy, planning and operational documents defining the initiative, which are regularly updated.
- The head of the institution (vice-chancellor, rector, president, etc.) will from time to time in senior meetings be notified of progress and problems with the initiative.

- The head of the institution is able to discuss the initiative in general terms with equivalent heads of other institutions – in the way that he/she would be able to discuss a new library, laboratory or similar large-scale development.

A further distinction is made between various scales of activities – “giant”, “major” and “notable” – and whether an initiative still is in existence or has “ceased” or “failed”. The next chapter, chapter 3, will go into much more detail on these and other distinctions that can be made.

As discussed previously, the term *virtual campus* became popular in the last 15 years (within Europe, largely thanks to projects and calls of the European Commission). It is clear that most people think of different things when talking about virtual campuses. Major characteristics agreed upon include some promotion and distribution of content, as well as some services available online. The main goal of a virtual campus is to provide a technologically supported place on the internet where students and teachers can “meet” without being in the same physical place at an institution. This creates advantages for learners and teachers. For example, a completely new feature that is created by the concept of a virtual campus is the possibility to study abroad at a foreign university without ever leaving one’s own country.

However, the term *virtual campus* is an umbrella term, and its name suggests that it may be marginal to the physical campus. The term can best be used as a very loose concept, which can be viewed as analogous to talk about *business* and *e-business*, or *government* and *e-government*. A virtual campus nowadays can in some cases be a stand-alone university, or in others a consortium of universities – but it is much more commonly a part of a university. A possible pitfall of the virtual campus idea is that it can seem to be the overarching and perhaps overly dominant concept, when in reality this is the case only in rather few institutions (so far).

## Conclusion

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To summarise, as a project group we do not want to take the arrogant view of presenting one final definition of the *virtual campus*. Time would catch up with us if we did so, and our work might run the risk of becoming obsolete. Thus for the time being we present a working definition, that involves large-scale initiatives (an inside-out dimension) which are recognisable on the list of characteristics above. The boundary approach makes it easier to change the definition in the future and discuss new opinions as they arise.

Our research in the frame of the Re.ViCa project has confirmed that there is no common understanding about the term *virtual campus* or even *virtual university*. Different names are applied to similar activities in different countries, and in some countries the term has fallen out of use altogether – or has never been really used. Often terms such as *e-learning*, *distance learning*, *blended learning* and *open learning* are more commonly used to indicate smaller virtual campus projects, programmes or activities within a university, or even course offerings in the context of on-the-job or professional training. However, these terms are often no clearer than *virtual campus* when one analyses them, and they are usually much more specific in scope – for example, see later in this handbook for the debates about “what is an open university?” Thus for all its faults and difficulties, we feel that the term *virtual campus* does provide a useful, if interim, basis for analyzing the worldwide phenomenon of e-learning initiatives in higher education institutions.

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