

WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE: AN INTERNATIONAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE VIRTUAL CAMPUS PHENOMENON

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Introduction

Virtual Mobility and Virtual Campus schemes can offer educational opportunities that are no longer location dependent and allow for collaboration with foreign students and teachers - thus promoting intercultural understanding. Apart from cross-cultural and mobility aspects, a Virtual Campus has a huge potential to contribute to increased participation in lifelong learning: students learn from their homes, after work in the time that is available for them.

Throughout the last decade, numerous initiatives have been set up to experiment with the establishment of Virtual Campuses and Virtual Mobility activities. Virtual Campuses have appeared in various forms and structures and to varying degrees of success. Examples of Virtual Campus initiatives in the past are manifold. To name a few: Finnish Virtual University, Swiss Virtual Campus, FernUniversität in Hagen, African Virtual University, etc. Furthermore, several eLearning, Socrates-Minerva and other projects supported by the European Commission have dealt with integrating virtual components into traditional universities.

Through the experience of past and present projects that have been exploring and refining the concepts of Virtual Campus and Virtual Mobility a gradual shift of concepts is noticed: from the "well-defined" clear, 100% online Virtual Campus to Virtual Mobility, whereby the more traditional universities open their borders, collaborate supra/intra institutionally and often (inter)nationally, and/or involve non-traditional students through e-learning. Actually, there is no strict definition of Virtual Campus or Virtual Mobility anymore. Every campus becomes a Virtual Campus, and every mobility has some form of Virtual Mobility included. "Blended models" gain more and more interest and attention. A redefinition of the "Virtual Campus" concept in order for it to be applicable to the educational needs of today seems thus necessary.

Investigating the Virtual Campus phenomenon: the Re.ViCa project

While numerous Virtual Campus initiatives in the past decade have gained experience and know-how, there is a striking lack of validation and dissemination of this knowledge. Detailed and consolidated information on Virtual Campuses is hard to come by. The European Commission acknowledged this need and has in for example the General Calls for Proposals in the Lifelong Learning Programme 2006 and 2008 attached specific priority to projects which are aiming at systematically reviewing existing Virtual Campus and Virtual Mobility projects or experiences, and supporting the development and dissemination of replicable solutions and approaches to help establishing and sustaining Virtual Campuses at European level.

In this context the Re.ViCa (“Reviewing (traces of) European Virtual Campuses”) project has been set-up. This two-year project makes an inventory and reviews institution-wide and cross-institution Virtual Campus initiatives (the so-called “Major E-Learning Initiatives”) of the past decade within higher education at European, national and regional levels.

Re.ViCa is looking not only at currently operational Virtual Campuses, but also at the legacy and impact of those initiatives that have ceased activities (“Failed E-Learning Initiatives”), such as the UkeUniversity and the Interactive University in Scotland.

The phenomenon of Virtual Campuses – dead or alive – is studied along a broad range of parameters taking into account the several classifications that have already been proposed by others. The project thereby synthesises and updates earlier work on critical success factors for e-universities and more generally for major change in scale and scope of e-learning.

A feature not common in EU projects is that it is contrasting its in-depth studies of European cases to selected non-European initiatives also, feeding the outcomes of this effort into a set of findings that can be used for future European initiatives.

The desktop research makes use of previous publications, research and activities in the field and takes into account previous project results in which Virtual Campuses have been studied and/or developed. Re.ViCa can amongst others build upon the partners’ experience with and involvement in Virtual Mobility and Virtual Campus projects (e.g. cEVU, e-LERU, VENUS, REVE, MASSIVE, BEING MOBILE, BENVIC...) and initiatives (e.g. Finnish Virtual University, UNINETTUNO, UkeUniversity, Open University of the Netherlands,...) and use their privileged strategic positions to collect vital information and open it up for the wider community of the European Higher Education Area.

The information gathered during the desktop research phase is validated by the numerous discussion sessions that Re.ViCa organises with different stakeholder and interest groups throughout the project. To bring in this outsiders point of view into the research, the partnership has set up an International Advisory Committee made up of about 20 European and non-European (from South Africa, Australia, Canada, Latin America,...) policy makers and renowned experts in the field. The IAC Committee members provide important access opportunities to global expertise and research in respect to Virtual Campuses. The experts are invited at key moments in the project to stimulate dialogue, share knowledge and to comment on the Re.ViCa research in progress.

A WIKI approach

To facilitate cooperation between partners on the research, the project is based round the use of a collaborative team of editors on a WIKI¹ which pulls all research (and other project) work together. The WIKI currently contains amongst other about 25 country reports within and outside Europe on higher education e-learning (on for example countries such as Austria, Sweden, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Poland, Italy, Australia, Brazil, Canada and South Africa).

¹ At the time of writing, the Re.ViCa WIKI is closed to external access until later in the project.

The reports describe the country in a nutshell, the education policy and system and the higher education institutions, but also issues such as the higher education reform in the country, administration and finance, quality assurance and last but not least of course the virtual initiatives in higher education are addressed.

On the WIKI, also a rapidly growing list of brief entries on major Virtual Campus programmes (such as the African Virtual University, Swiss Virtual Campus, UkeU, Nettuno, etc.) is being created based on databases produced earlier by UNESCO and the e-University Compendium.

Furthermore, a round of case study reports including open universities, national initiatives and blended learning programmes including from private providers is worked on. Parameters along which the cases are described include the past and present of the institution, external environment, strategy, structure, (meta) learning and teaching processes, staff, students, technology, etc.

The WIKI finally contains a lot of information of relevance to Re.ViCa activities (list of publications, project outcomes and other WIKIs, biographical information on key experts, a glossary, project info, etc.)

It is the intention that a community of experts find their way to the WIKI and keep on updating the materials. Therefore the partners are looking at success indicators for community building so the Re.ViCa WIKI can become a self-sustainable objective source of in-depth information on Virtual Campus issues after the project has ended.

Conclusion

Through previous experiences, we have noticed a shift of concepts: from the "well-defined" clear, 100% online Virtual Campus to Virtual Mobility, whereby the more traditional universities open their borders and "blended models" gain more and more interest. To raise awareness and redefine the concept of Virtual Campus the Re.ViCa project has been set-up. The purpose of this project is to make an inventory and systematic review of institution-wide and cross-institutional Virtual Campus initiatives.

At the end of the project all results will – apart from the WIKI – also be collected in a "Virtual Campus Manual" with guidelines, best practices and recommendations. The manual will draw conclusions regarding success factors and long term traces of Virtual Universities/Virtual Campuses and is aimed at regional, national and European political decision makers, advisors, government and administration, education authorities, e-learning industry, research community and Virtual Campus management. The manual will be made available online and in hard copy.

Re.ViCa's added value lies not in the creation of a new Virtual Campus but in the foundations it will lay for all future or current initiatives which can learn from the past and from other initiatives. The research results incorporate feedback from all stakeholder groups and can be used as standard literature for all current and future initiatives. It will help to make the most out of each initiative, to foresee hidden traps and to find ways of incorporating successful features of the initiative in the university structure itself, should the Virtual Campus in its original form have to be discontinued.

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(University of West Hungary) (HU); Università Telematica Internazionale UNINETTUNO (International Telematic University UNINETTUNO) (IT); Matic Media Ltd (UK).

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MASSIVE Modelling Advice and Support Services to Integrate the Virtual Component in Higher Education: <http://cevug.ugr.es/massive>

REVE Real Virtual Erasmus <http://reve.europace.org>

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VENUS Virtual and E-mobility for Networking Universities in Society <http://www.venus-project.net>