

## **Re.ViCa: An International Investigation into the Virtual Campus phenomenon**

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### **Introduction**

Higher education institutions have a new, unique, and valuable role in educating the populace to participate in an increasingly global and technological economy. ICT makes it possible to create flexible learning paths and to open the borders of the university to off-campus students and to support on-campus students in their regular learning experiences. Virtual Campus schemes offer educational opportunities that are no longer location dependent and allow for collaboration with foreign students and teachers (and thus promote intercultural understanding). Apart from these 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 Campus activities in various structures and to varying degrees of success. 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.

In this context the Re.ViCa project has been set up. Re.ViCa stands for "Reviewing (traces of) European Virtual Campuses". The project runs from October 2007 to September 2009. It brings together nine partners in the field that use their privileged strategic positions to collect vital information and open it up for the wider community of the European Higher Education Area. The project can, amongst other aspects, build upon the partners' experience with and involvement in Virtual Campus projects and initiatives.

The Re.ViCa project is creating an inventory and reviewing institution-wide and cross-institution Virtual Campus initiatives of the past decade within higher education at global, national and regional levels. Through the experience of past and present projects that have been exploring and refining the concept of Virtual Campus a gradual shift of the concept is noticed: from the "well-defined" clear, 100% online Virtual Campus to more blended models, 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. In this respect, the project focuses on a broad spectrum of higher education institutions, from the traditional research universities to distance education institutions and fully Virtual Universities. By promoting the best cases of Virtual Campus and by comparing European and non-European initiatives, guidelines and critical success factors are created that enable European Virtual Campuses or institutions interested to setting up a Virtual Campus to maximise their performance.

In this paper we first provide some broad definitions and descriptions of what is generally understood by Virtual Campus initiatives and explain the project's research approach. We continue with indications for critical success factors, finishing with a first analysis of the Virtual Campus initiatives already described in the research work package in Re.ViCa.

## Definition of a Virtual Campus

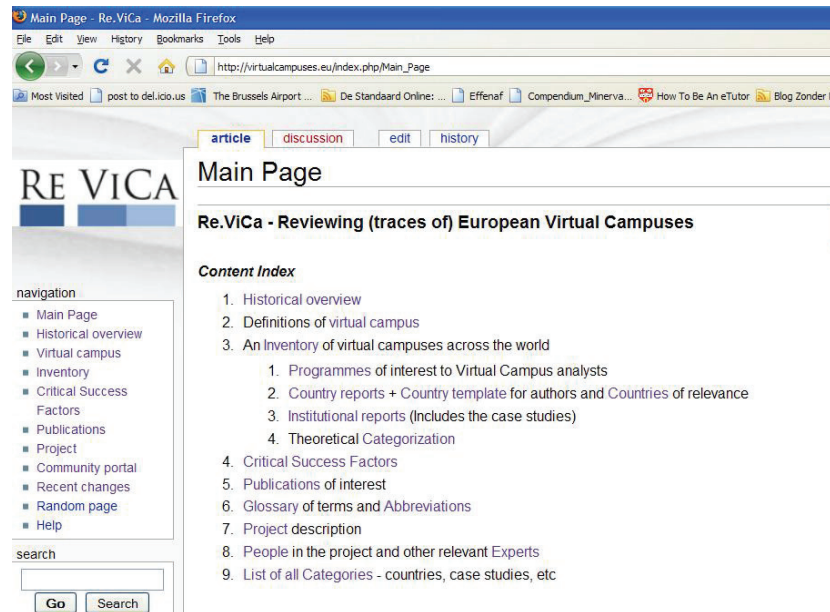
The phrase "Virtual Campus" became prominent around 1997 (an early workshop on this topic was organised by Robin Mason and Paul Bacsich (both then at the UK Open University) at the ED-MEDIA conference in Boston in 1996), when various universities launched their versions of a Virtual Campus. It is often applied to a single university which has a virtual university "fringe" round a physical campus, but there are also some totally Virtual Campuses (such as the Open University of Catalonia in Spain). The Benchmarking of Virtual Campuses (BENVIC) project was one of the earliest projects funded by the European Commission addressing the issue of benchmarking Virtual Campuses. In BENVIC the Virtual Campus concept is referred to as "a specific format of distance education and on-line learning in which students, teaching staff and even university administrative and technical staff mainly 'meet' or communicate through technical links" (<http://www.benvic.odl.org/indexpr.html>).

In Re.ViCa we aim to take Virtual Campus as synonymous with large-scale e-learning initiatives. This avoids the issue of giving distance e-learning a privileged position over campus-based e-learning but begs the question of what is large-scale? An e-learning initiative in a university - or consortium of universities - is major if it has many (but not necessarily all) of the characteristics as stated in table 1.

1. It requires at least one per cent of the institutional budget (this is a rule of thumb taken from Activity Based Costing theory that it is pointless to track from the top any initiatives below that level of expenditure)
2. 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
3. There is a specific department to manage and deliver the initiative with a degree of autonomy from mainstream IT, library, pedagogic or quality structures
4. Progress of the initiative is overseen by a Steering Group chaired by one of the most senior managers in the institution
5. The initiative is part of the institution's business plan and is not totally dependent on any particular externally funded project
6. There are strategy, planning and operational documents defining the initiative and regularly updated
7. The head of the institution will from time to time in senior meetings be notified of progress and problems with the initiative
8. 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

## Research Approach

The Re.ViCa research team conducts its research on Virtual Campuses along a broad range of parameters. The team has set-up a wiki for collaborative research and to build-up an expert community. This wiki has turned out to be the key component of the Re.ViCa project.



Re.ViCa wiki: <http://www.virtualcampuses.eu>

To start, the research group collected numerous studies that have been carried out in order to analyse the phenomenon of Virtual Campuses and e-learning. BENVIC, MASSIVE, MEGATRENDS, eLERU, *E-Learning in Tertiary Education – Where do we stand?* (OECD, 2005) are examples of studies, available on the Re.ViCa wiki. An in-depth cross-sectional analysis has been conducted to identify which are the key issues and research approaches that the studies point out. Re.ViCa partners did not only look at currently operational Virtual Campuses, but also at the legacy and impact within higher education of those Virtual Campus initiatives that have ceased activities.

### ***Inventory of Virtual Campus Initiatives: List of Interesting Virtual Campus Initiatives, Country Reports and in-depth case studies***

To create the inventory of Virtual Campuses, the Re.ViCa consortium developed currently 31 country reports on higher education e-learning, together with shorter notes on a further 27 countries and a list of brief entries on notable Virtual Campus initiatives, including all the main EU programmes in this area. The list of interesting Virtual Campus initiatives is mainly based on already identified initiatives and contains both major, as well as some smaller but also notable e-learning initiatives. This resulted in a list of over 350 interesting Virtual Campus initiatives, sorted by continent, country and categorised in different ways – including international, national, public and private.

The main sources of information were:

- The lists of institutions within The e-University Compendium and the UNESCO IIEP List
- Reports from Swedish Net Agency study trips
- E-learning\_Progress\_at\_Ain-Shams\_University - a list of virtual universities by region
- The eLearning industry and market in Europe - Lot 1: Appendix to Synthesis Report by Jane Massy
- The Gazetteer
- The MegaTrends project
- The E.A.S.Y Project
- Virtual Campuses supported by the European Commission
- The researchers' personal networks – members work or have worked in over 10 major initiatives

To interpret the Virtual Campus initiatives structure, appearance, failures and successes, and to identify major e-learning initiatives (Virtual Campuses) the Re.ViCa consortium created country reports giving an overview of the Higher Education policies and organisational structures with a special focus on the "Information society" and the identification of Virtual Campus initiatives. The country reports were preliminary created by the project partners, based on the networks expertise and already created country reports, like the OECD country reports, documents of the ministries of education, official e-learning officers and leading e-learning experts.

To increase the value and accuracy of the country reports, the partnership set up an external evaluation team, that consisted out of experts in the field of e-learning within the countries described. With the input of the experts' evaluations, the country reports were corrected and updated.

Furthermore, a round of case study reports including open universities, national initiatives and blended learning programmes including those from private providers is currently being worked on. The Re.ViCa consortium has identified, surveyed and analysed 9 in-depth case studies. Interviews were conducted with different stakeholders from various levels within the HEIs. The case studies were developed based on a face-to-face interview, together with the information obtained through the initial review process and desktop research. The case studies available on the wiki are: University of Eastern Finland, Swiss Virtual Campus, University of Derby, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Nancy-Université, Open Universiteit Nederland, K.U.Leuven Association, UNINETTUNO and Hibernia College.

Parameters used in these descriptions include the history and current state of the institution, the external environment as well as information about the strategies in place, (meta) learning and teaching processes as well as descriptions of staff, students, technology.

This desktop research is validated by in-depth discussion sessions that Re.ViCa organises with different stakeholder groups at various stages of the project, to incorporate the input of different interest groups: including Virtual Campus management bodies, relevant networks, students, policy makers and a range of experts at a global as well as European level.

### ***Critical Success Factors***

By promoting the best cases of Virtual Campus and by comparing European and non-European initiatives, guidelines and critical success factors (CSFs) are created that enable Virtual Campuses or institutions interested to setting up a Virtual Campus to maximise their performance.

*A critical success factor contains elements of organisational activity which is central to its future success. CSFs are “those things that must be done if a company is to be successful”. They should be few in number, measurable and controllable.*

There have been many projects which have been looking for CSFs. In this project we first carried out desktop research and learned from other projects (for an overview and download of the reports and literature, see the project website) and came to a list of 99 CSFs. In spring 2008 the first International Advisory Committee Meeting took place at the EDEN Annual Conference in Lisbon, Portugal. In this meeting, experts worked together in teams, bringing the list back to 29 essential factors. In a second meeting, at the annual ONLINE EDUCA BERLIN Conference in Germany, December 2008, we let the International Advisory Committee (N= 17) vote on the 29 CSFs, using an electronic voting system with which they suggest to keep or remove CSFs from the list. After each voting there was the possibility to have a discussion on that criterion. The data collection resulted in a quantitative part (the voting) and a qualitative part (the discussion). The list of Critical Success Factors is available on the Re.ViCa wiki.

Due to limited space in this paper we will take out the highlights of the discussion. One issue was that some experts think that leadership in e-learning is not a CSF. There was some discussion about the notion of “leadership” and what makes a good leader. There was also a discussion whether success of large e-learning initiatives do rely so much on individuals. On the other hand, there are some projects to improve leadership in e-learning. There was a reference to eLearning leadership projects carried out between South Africa and the Netherlands (for more info see Re.ViCa website). In the end, the conclusion was that leadership still can be seen as a CSF. The qualitative data support this idea. Related to that, there was also a discussion on the importance of an e-learning strategy. The question was whether e-learning can properly be considered a strategy at all, particularly as e-learning becomes more and more mainstream. Must there be a separate e-learning strategy or is it part of normal learning strategy at an institution? The importance of strategies in general was discussed as well as the lack of distinction between e-learning and learning in general. The suggestion was to distinguish between strategic and operational goals when it comes to e-learning strategy. For now, e-learning strategy is still a CSF, and to emphasise its importance, it is treated as a separate strategy. In the future e-learning can probably be included in a general learning strategy. There was quite some discussion about Management Style with many IAC members suggesting it be dropped. The discussion addressed questions related to the acceptance of eLearning by some employers, some see E-learning as low quality learning with low value.

## **Conclusions**

This paper described the research activities conducted in the frame of the Re.ViCa project and highlighted some of the results.

First of all, throughout the world there are many specific situations, contexts and people working in the e-learning field. Numerous initiatives have been set up to experiment with the establishment of Virtual Campus activities in various structures and to varying degrees of success. Although every situation is unique, one can generalise on success factors and failures. We see that in different countries projects are dealing with the same problems and topics. The goal of the Re.ViCa project is to provide an overview, and a critical view on all these issues and projects. The added value of a project such as Re.ViCa presented above lies in the foundations it will lay for all future or current initiatives which can learn from past and ongoing initiatives. Trustworthy research results are needed, in which feedback from all stakeholder groups has been incorporated and which can be used as standard literature. Re.ViCa will help to make the most out of the knowledge gained by 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. The aim is to avoid a situation whereby every new Virtual Campus proponent has to start from the beginning, and to provide stakeholders instead with a validated and comprehensive view of the Virtual Campus landscape in Europe as evidenced in the last decade. Roadmaps for establishing Virtual Campuses should be promoted, exchange of information, expert validation and sharing of good-practice should be a key objective. The partners are also looking at success indicators for community building in order to find a way in which the Re.ViCa wiki can become a self-sustainable objective source of in-depth information on the Virtual Campus phenomenon. The Re.ViCa partnership plans to officially open the Re.ViCa wiki to the public during the ICDE/EADTU Conference.

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