

HEFCE Online Learning Task Force – Response from Re.ViCa consortium

Matic Media Ltd, as the UK member of the Re.ViCa consortium, is pleased to make a response to the Online Learning Task Force. Our evidence base is on a public wiki at www.virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/Main_Page.

Re.ViCa has produced a 180-page A5 Handbook which is also available online at www.virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/Handbook – however, many readers prefer the physical Handbook.

The consortium has available copies of its Handbook for supply free of charge to all members of the Task Force in time for its next meeting, should they so wish.

BACKGROUND

Re.ViCa – Review of (Traces of) Virtual Campuses – was a consortium-based study project funded under the EU Lifelong Learning Programme, which ran from October 2007 to September 2009. Since then the consortium has continued to maintain/update the resource bank and to publish bi-monthly online Newsletters – available at www.virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/Newsletters.

The aspiration of Re.ViCa was to provide a comprehensive database of all major e-learning initiatives in higher education in the world and a list of critical success factors whose satisfaction would tend to guarantee the success of such initiatives. A comprehensive database has been produced, hosted on a wiki at www.virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/Programmes, with over 500 active initiatives – entries on these are cross-correlated with entries on all the 248 countries in the world. In addition there are nine comprehensive *Case Studies* of which the UK one is on the University of Derby (www.virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/University_of_Derby_-_Case_study) and another highly relevant one on Hibernia College, Ireland. The project also produced a 180-page *Handbook* as noted above. Finally a set of *Critical Success Factors* was created – with a linked set of key success factors – and mapped back to the Pick&Mix benchmarking system as used in the Higher Education Academy/JISC Benchmarking E-Learning Exercise and associated activity at 29 institutions in England and Wales (elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/index.php/Pick&Mix)

An April 2010 update on the US country report is available in the Newsletter and the Critical Success Factors scheme is being used in the Distance Learning Benchmarking Club, a work package in the JISC Curriculum Delivery project “DUCKLING”) at seven universities in UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Sweden (www.engq.eu/files/ENQA%20PaulBacsich%20final.pdf, slides 36–38).

The Newsletter goes to over 500 subscribers across the world and we encourage members of the Task Force to join others reading and contributing to it.

HEFCE’S QUESTIONS

We answer the questions from the point of view of a project which has studied many e-learning institutions and national initiatives around the world and in particular tried to provide a wider context for the lessons from large UK initiatives such as Benchmarking and Pathfinder (see *Transforming Higher Education Through Technology Enhanced Learning*, www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/learningandtech/Transforming.pdf) and the ongoing JISC Curriculum Design and Delivery programmes (www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/curriculum).

A. What are the motivators behind your strategy and what are barriers and enablers that the OLTF should understand and try to address?

There are many motivations for university strategies, and interestingly in the special case of distance learning there is much more interest by institutions in market share in some countries for whom it might not be expected (e.g. Sweden).

Our approach to barriers and enablers is encapsulated in our list of *Critical Success Factors*, covering (inter alia) such topics as formulation of an e-learning strategy, strong leadership with appropriate knowledge of e-learning issues, effective decision-making, and technical support to staff; and less obvious ones such as relationship management (to funders and stakeholders), management style, and system reliability at commercial levels (*Handbook*, pp. 106–110).

B. What organisational structures and collaborations do you see as most successful in facilitating the successful development and delivery of online learning?

For on-campus e-learning we note the gradual but steady move globally towards hub-and-spoke models for support and a steady increase in the seniority of the person with the main management role for e-learning (as already evident from the benchmarking e-learning activities in the UK). For substantial distance learning initiatives it is still the case that the best results are often achieved if there is a specialist and semi-autonomous unit (though not necessarily a joint venture). Attention should be paid to *dual-mode* institutions in this regard – those where the distance and on-campus modes are in approximate balance – such as Thompson Rivers University in Canada.

C. How can universities and colleges create and develop appropriate cultures to ensure that online learning thrives within an institution?

The *Handbook* in its section on *Moving to Change* (pp. 131–136) summarises the main potential change strategies – including the well-regarded *Carpe Diem* approach. For *sustaining* change, attention must be paid to the criteria on work planning (as part of cost analysis) and on staff reward/recognition (note that there are linkages between these two criteria) – levels of capability on these are still not adequate in many institutions trying to engage substantially with e-learning.

D. How does online learning fit into the strategic vision of your organisation over the next five to 10 years?

At a global level the overwhelming conclusion is that distance learning is again high on agendas at international, national and regional levels. These signify high levels of activity, not only rhetoric. Distance learning at the mass scale – not only from the established Open Universities – is found of course in the US, Canada and Australia – but also all across Latin America, the Middle East and many parts of Asia. Much of this seems to not previously been noticed in the UK due to linguistic barriers – to the analysts (not the students).

This is true in Europe too and not just Eastern Europe. In Sweden a national consultation on distance learning is under way and by some counts over 25% of students study all or in part at a distance. France is undertaking several major actions in distance and e-learning as part of its Digital France 2012 plan – see especially Actions 98 and 99 (<http://www.virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/France>).

SPECIFIC REMARKS ON AREAS OF WORK

The input to this section is based on an article on the Task Force in the Re.ViCa *Newsletter* for February/March 2010 –

http://www.virtualcampuses.eu/images/a/a8/Re.ViCa_newsletter_1002.pdf.

1. The current level of online provision in the UK, including the types of institutions and courses where it is available, the proportion of online learning compared to other modes of learning in courses, and investigating what kind of students (for example, full-time, part-time, work-based) can study via online means.

Re.ViCa did not carry out detailed work within specific countries – its focus was European and global – but a small study was done to identify the main distance learning providers in the UK – see

http://www.virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/United_Kingdom_-_distance_learning.

2. The international market for online learning, focusing on UK HE's competitors, and considering how the UK may be able to attract a greater number of students.

The Re.ViCa *Handbook* and associated *wiki* contain a vast amount of information about online learning in HE across the world, including on that delivered nationally and trans-nationally in the English language. Many more countries than commonly believed are now teaching some online courses in English, including several from Europe outside the UK and Ireland – Sweden is a notable example but even in countries commonly regarded as lacking such provision, such as Belgium, it is in fact lurking under the surface. We have identified around 170 Programmes (large scale online learning initiatives) in Western Europe. In the Rest of the World there are nearly 300. There are currently 86 countries with one or more Programmes. The headline conclusion is that this is considerably more than we expected. Of the Programmes, we identify 52 as “national initiatives” – those Programmes where a country (or state within a country) has aimed to take action. Typically most countries have only one national initiative extant at any given time – Swedish Net University, Swiss Virtual Campus, etc. However, a surprising number of countries, including in Europe, have none – or none currently. In contrast, a few countries seem to have a large appetite for national initiatives. Thus there are, in fact, just over 20 different countries with one or more national initiative.

While it is generally known that there is much activity in the US, even our analysts were taken aback by the scale and the pervasiveness of activity right across their HE sector including in the community colleges. For an up to date view see www.virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/US and the survey article *Online Education Today* by authors from the Sloan Foundation and Re.ViCa (www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/323/5910/85).

The task force will also investigate costing models for online learning to support HEIs in developing this area of their learning and teaching.

The International Advisory Board for Re.ViCa (whose members include Professor Gilly Salmon) confirmed that cost control for e-learning was one of the Critical Success Factors. Re.ViCa activity has confirmed that (as suspected in the UK) levels of this are not adequate. On the more general question of costing models, Re.ViCa is not aware of any newer analytic study in this area than the *Costs of E-Learning Scoping Exercise* Report and Discussion Paper commissioned by the JISC Committee for Learning and Teaching in autumn 2008 (www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/committees/jlt/27/24b_cost_benefits_elearning.pdf).