

Chapter XVI

Developing and Managing an Effective Virtual Campus: The eLab Experience in the Swiss Higher Education Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a successful Swiss experience in developing and effectively managing virtual campus projects: eLab, the eLearning Laboratory of the University of Lugano and the University of Applied Sciences of Italian Switzerland. eLab activities are presented at two distinct moments in time. We first describe the context of e-learning in Swiss higher education institutions, focusing in particular on the Swiss Virtual Campus programme. During that programme, eLab emerged as one of the best performing e-learning support centres in Switzerland, thanks to three main elements: the establishment of a clear prototype-based design and development model, the definition of quality control procedures, and the implementation of a consistent and institution-wide online learning environment. After the end of the programme, eLab had to switch from a project-oriented laboratory towards a service unit. The general strategy that drove this change and the concrete tools and practices that made it possible are presented in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

eLab is the e-learning Laboratory of the University of Lugano (USI: Università della Svizzera italiana) and the University of Applied Sciences of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI: Scuola Universitaria Professionale della Svizzera Italiana), two higher education institutions of Ticino, the Italian speaking part of Switzerland.

eLab is one of the Support and Production Centres (CCSP) that were founded in Swiss Higher Education Institutions (HEI) thanks to an initiative of the Swiss Virtual Campus (SVC), a national programme launched by the Swiss University Conference in 1999. The programme aimed at “promoting innovative Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based e-learning at Swiss Universities at a high level of quality that is commensurate with that provided at the top international institutions in the field” (SVC, n. d.). The three main goals of the SVC were:

- To improve the quality of student learning processes and strengthen interactive teaching by broadening university teaching into a range of available courses for both on-campus and corresponding students;
- To strengthen collaboration between universities;
- To develop high-quality teaching materials and methods.

The SVC funded 108 projects and 10 *ad hoc* mandates. It was discontinued in 2008, leaving an important inheritance in most Swiss universities. As operative units, the SVC promoted the institution of CCSP. The overall context of this chapter are the activities of the SVC, which was indeed the most influential initiative to promote and establish e-learning experiences throughout the Swiss higher education landscape at large. The first two sections will provide background information on this and introduce the eLab. In this chapter we present the successful case of one of

the e-learning support centres, namely the eLab. Although eLab is the CCSP of two of the youngest and smallest Swiss higher education institutions (HEI), during the SVC programme it proved to be one of the best performing centres in the country, thanks to three main strategic elements: (a) the establishment of a clear prototype-based design and development model; (b) the definition of quality control procedures; and (c) the implementation of a consistent and institution-wide online learning environment.

After the end of the SVC programme, eLab had to tackle a new challenge: switching from a project-oriented laboratory towards a service unit, providing ongoing support to the established educational technologies initiatives in its home institutions. This implied getting to be sustainable after the end of the SVC financial support. The general strategy that drove this change is presented later in this chapter. It was – and still is – an attempt to create an effective virtual campus among USI and SUPSI, throughout their five seats, based on the experience eLab had previously gained in managing and supporting SVC projects.

E-LEARNING IN SWISS HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Although a small country, Switzerland hosts a rich and diverse higher education landscape, including ten cantonal universities, two Federal Institutes of Technology and seven Universities of Applied Sciences focused on professional education and applied research (Lepori, 2007). The development of e-learning in Swiss HEI went through a rather slow start, before rocketing up from the end of the 1990s thanks to the launch of the SVC (Swiss University Conference, 1996, 1997 & 2003). In its first phase, or *impulse* phase, run from 1999 to 2003, the SVC financed a rather small number of large consortia among Swiss HEI to develop high-quality teaching materials for online education. The underlying rationale was that these courses

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