Promoting the Use of ICT for Education in a Traditional University: The Case of the Virtual Learning Center of the University of Granada

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case describes the Virtual Learning Center of the University of Granada in Spain. It relates the creation of a specific service structure to manage the promotion of the use of ICT and e-learning in the educational processes of a large, traditional, five century-old university. With just the base of a few previous pilot experiences, this Center, created in February 2001, had to address the training of the teaching staff of the University in ICT competences and the creation of both graduate and post-graduate virtual courses.

Four years later, all the proposed goals have been achieved and, currently, the University of Granada has more than 4,000 virtual students and more than one third of its academic staff (around 1,200 teachers) have proper e-learning skills, with some of them being able to create their own digital materials for face-to-face teaching support and blended learning.

Keywords: case study; e-learning; internet-based instruction; instructional design; institutional policy; teachers’ IS skills and IT competency; undergraduate and postgraduate education

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The University of Granada in Spain was founded in 1531, under the initiative of the Emperor Carlos V, by means of a Papal Bull from Pope Clemente VII. In this way, Granada asserted its vocation as a university city which was open to different cultures, people and beliefs. With more than 470 years of tradition, the University of Granada has been an exceptional witness to history. Its influence in the city’s social and cultural environment grew until it was to become,
over a period of almost five centuries, an intellectual and cultural nucleus in Southern Spain in its own right.

At present, it has 24 university centers and 4 associates, 69,811 degree and diploma students (year 2004), 10,000 students of Spanish as a foreign language, 3,000 doctorate students, 3,423 lecturers, 1,729 administration and service staff, and more than 3,300 professors in 108 departments. The University of Granada currently runs 50 degree courses, 22 diploma courses, 132 doctorate programs and a wide range of courses (of varying length) related to almost every area of knowledge.

The University of Granada takes an active part in the European Union university programs, both in the mobility of teachers and students as well as research. The programs are coordinated by the Office of International Relations and aimed at EU countries and other geographical areas (Latin America, Eastern Europe, North Africa, etc.).

By way of bilateral or specific agreements between groups of universities, it has traditionally collaborated with universities from these geographical areas as well as with the USA, Japan, China, Israel, Canada, Australia, Benin, Asian countries from the former USSR, Palestine, and so forth, and university associations such as the Coimbra Group, the AUIP, ISTEC, ATEI, and so forth. All these are some examples of collaborative initiatives.

Although the three most intense areas of cooperation, as might be expected for a country such as Spain and a university with the tradition of Granada, are the European Union, Latin America and the Magreb, of no lesser importance are the lines of collaboration which exist with the remaining countries mentioned above. As a result of this cooperation, the University of Granada receives more than 8,000 lecturers, students and university administrators each year from all over the world, who attend Spanish classes, regular courses (around 5% of registration numbers), teach, and collaborate with research groups.

The University of Granada has made a strong commitment to its future by means of the development of quality research. The criteria behind its research activity are to stress traditional lines of research in order to support those which, although less developed, may be interesting to a changing society, and to forge bonds with firms and institutions. These ideas offer advantages which have enabled to increase funds allocated to research and to open real future perspectives that never existed before.

As a result of the growth in scientific production, the University of Granada is among the top three Spanish universities. The growing relations with private and public companies in the country, through research contracts and provision of services, are the guarantee for the future. Besides, the same commitment is made in the quality control of teaching processes. A classical, old university such as ours must offer the best formation programs. With this aim, a specific Vice-Rectorate is in charge of all the aspects related to quality in education.

The application of ICT to science, economy, educational institutions, culture, and so forth, implies a wide variety of transformations in both aspects: in the way people behave and interact and in how services are provided. The University, as an institution that generates knowledge, is also responsible for the use of these new technologies with academic goals. Since 1995, the University of Granada has encouraged the application of ICT in its curricula. The daily use of technology requires an essential change in the way of training, teaching, and learning. If this were not the case, we run the risk of giving way to the so-called “digital breach”. For that reason, the University of Granada is aimed at promoting the application of the ICT for the improvement of the teaching and learning system and the academic community at large.

At the University of Granada, the Vice-Rectorate of New Technologies promotes a progressive and continuing expansion of the use of ICT into the field of learning, knowledge and technology through its different services areas (Library Services, Computer Services and ICT
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