Chapter X
Guiding Principles for Identifying and Promoting Best Practice in Virtual Campuses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will outline a set of guiding principles underpinning key issues in the promotion of best practice in virtual campuses. The work was conducted as part of the "Promoting Best Practice in Virtual Campuses" (PBP-VC) project that is aimed at identifying underlying issues and examples of best practice in providing a better understanding into virtual campus development and sustainability. The PBP-VC project was a two year European Commission Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) co-financed project running from March 2007 to February 2009. The PBP-VC project team have worked with key stakeholders from virtual campus projects across Europe and globally in identifying and exploring key issues relating to best practice. The importance of developing a practical set of guiding principles for identifying, evaluating and promoting best practice in virtual campuses and e-learning can be demonstrated by the significant number of high profile e-learning and virtual campus failures that have occurred over the last decade both within Europe and globally at great financial cost. This chapter will highlight key enablers and inhibitors to success, provide a description of the different elements comprising the guiding principles in the promotion of best practice, as well as describing a tentative four level model aimed at illustrating different levels of virtual campus maturity in the achievement of sustainability and organisational transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of the European Union, over the last 5 years there has been a significant increase in the growth of virtual campus projects and initiatives that have been co-financed by the Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). In total there have been more than twenty virtual campus related projects covering areas such virtual mobility, teacher training, the economics of e-learning and the reuse and sharing of e-learning courses. Whilst there is no universally accepted definition of the term 'virtual campus', the EACEA (2006) consider a virtual campus to encompass cooperation among a number of higher education institutions in the field of e-learning in relation to the design and development of joint curricula that are based on online and traditional learning methods. A virtual learning environment by itself or the provision of an e-learning programme within a single higher education institution would not be defined by the EACEA as a virtual campus. To qualify as a virtual campus, the initiative would have to include a number of partners which could comprise higher education institutions, as well as other teaching and learning related organisations who through a partnership agreement, cooperate in the development and implementation of joint curricula based on e-learning or blended learning delivery. Although virtual campus projects and initiatives may differ in terms of their model of delivery, e-learning issues such as those relating to e-learning technology and e-learning pedagogy play a key role in the development and delivery of joint curricula provided by a virtual campus (EACEA, 2006).

In terms of e-learning and virtual campus-related initiatives more generally, at both European and global levels there have been a number of problems and weaknesses that have beset high profile initiatives that have led to their ultimate failure. Keegan et al., (2007) identify several high profile e-learning initiatives across the world that

received significant external funding but failed to reach their targeted goals. Such initiatives included the UK E-University which ran from 2000-2004 with an expenditure of £50million, the Alliance for Lifelong Learning (US and UK) that ran from 2000-2006 with an expenditure of $27million, and the Competence Network of Norwegian Business and Industry (NKN) that ran from 2000-2002 with an expenditure of €7-9million. Common issues that led to the downfall of such large-scale initiatives were identified by Keegan et al., (2007) as including overly ambitious plans in relation to the potential student market, a lack of financial planning in relation to revenue and expenses, and a lack of planning in relation to the management of both education and business activities.

In relation to European Commission co-financed virtual campus related projects, the EACEA (2005) identified certain key issues that they consider influence a successful outcome. It was felt that virtual campuses generally have very little contact and interoperability with each other due to a lack of awareness about other virtual campuses, as well as a lack of self promotion/dissemination activities by virtual campuses. As a result it was recommended that more support be provided for a systematic critical review of existing virtual campuses and a greater sharing of know-how, particularly in supporting the dissemination of replicable solutions for establishing virtual campuses and bringing together a community of decision-makers involved in setting up virtual campuses. It was with these recommendations in mind that in 2006 the 'Promoting Best Practice in Virtual Campuses (PBP-VC)' project was developed and subsequently received co-financing from the EACEA.

THE PBP-VC PROJECT: PROMOTING BEST PRACTICE IN VIRTUAL CAMPUSES

The PBP-VC project is a two year European Commission EACEA co-financed project running from

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