

Chapter XII

Virtual Campus Development on the Basis of Subsidiarity: The EVS Approach

Ron Cörvers

Open University of the Netherlands, The Netherlands

Joop de Kraker

Open University of the Netherlands, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this chapter is to highlight the importance of subsidiarity in the development of a virtual campus. Subsidiarity is the principle that matters ought to be handled by the lowest competent authority. In our view, subsidiarity is crucial to sustainable approaches in virtual mobility. We support this view by two case descriptions: the development and implementation of a very successful virtual course - European Virtual Seminar on Sustainable Development (EVS) and the project to expand from this single course to a virtual campus - Virtual Campus for a Sustainable Europe (VCSE). We conclude that the factors determining the viability and uptake of international online learning initiatives, such as virtual campuses, are a bottom-up approach enabled by the availability of inexpensive ICT, an educationally driven need for virtual mobility, and interdependence within the international partnership.

INTRODUCTION

Physical mobility of students and teachers, who may spend a period of time abroad to study or teach at another university, has become a familiar phenomenon in many European countries over the past decades. For over 20 years, the European Commission has been stimulating

physical mobility in its member states through the Erasmus programme. The objectives of this international exchange programme range from promoting a sense of European citizenship and the competence to cope with cultural diversity, to improving access to high quality education throughout Europe and improving the quality of higher education through international collabora-

tion and competition. The Erasmus programme can be considered a success, given that more than 1.5 million students have participated since 1987 (European Commission, 2006). In fact, however, in each academic year, less than 1% of the total European student population take courses at a university in another member state (Bijnens et al., 2006). The European Commission is currently aiming for a major increase in student mobility by 2012 (European Commission, 2008), but it appears that these targets will not be achieved by physical mobility alone. Even if the campaign is successful, the large majority of students will not be internationally mobile, due to a variety of social, organisational, administrative, financial and physical barriers. It is for these students that an alternative has been suggested in the form of virtual mobility, i.e., ‘using information and communication technologies (ICT) to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility, but without the need to travel.’ (eLearningEuropa.info, cited in: Bijnens et al., 2006). A recent best practice manual and review of European virtual mobility projects distinguishes four main types of virtual student mobility: virtual courses, virtual study programmes, virtual student placements and virtual support activities to physical mobility (Bijnens et al., 2006). A virtual campus, the topic of this chapter, is a web-based platform to deliver either a collection of virtual (e-learning) courses or an entire virtual study programme. In addition to teaching and learning functions, a virtual campus usually includes administrative support services, such as web-based enrolment, and sometimes also social functions, such as a web-based ‘cafeteria’ (chat rooms). In the context of virtual mobility in the European Union, a virtual campus is based on international cooperation between higher education institutions, involving formal or informal agreements on quality assurance, entrance requirements, transfer of credits etc. (cf. European Commission, 2007).

The main objective of this chapter is to highlight the importance of subsidiarity in the

development of a virtual campus. Subsidiarity is the principle that matters ought to be handled by the lowest competent authority (Wikipedia). This concept is a fundamental principle of European Union law. The basic idea of subsidiarity is that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks that cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level. The principle is applicable in fields of government and business management, but also in education. In our view, subsidiarity is crucial in sustainable (i.e., viable) approaches to virtual mobility. This view is supported in this chapter by two cases, the development and implementation of a very successful virtual course and the project to expand from this single course to a virtual campus. Before discussing these two cases, we first briefly explain the motivation at our institution to integrate virtual mobility elements into the curriculum. The chapter concludes with our view on the factors determining the viability and uptake of international online learning initiatives, such as virtual campuses.

VIRTUAL MOBILITY AND LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Recent reviews of virtual mobility initiatives list many actual or potential advantages and benefits at student and teacher as well as institutional level (Bijnens et al., 2006; Brey, 2007). These range from better Europe-wide access to courses for students, to an enriched, internationalised work environment for teachers, and a cost-effective expansion of the number of courses being offered for universities. In our context, which is that of the Bachelors and Masters Degree programme in Environmental Sciences at the Open University of the Netherlands (OUNL), educational objectives set by the teaching staff were of prime importance in the decision to integrate international virtual courses into the curriculum. One of the

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