Chapter 7.8
Network Organisation to Improve Virtual Campus Management:
Key Factors from a French Experience

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ABSTRACT

In the restructuring and reforming of European education, e-learning has become one of the priorities of the Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Research in France. Since 2001, e-learning virtual campuses have been promoted by the state. Within the context of Economics and Management, the CANEGE project (CAmpus Numérique en Economie-GEstion) was created. Identified as a form of network organisation, this virtual campus will be explored in this chapter in relation to its functioning and its management. Through the academic literature covering network organisation, the main purpose of this chapter is to make recommendations and establish best practices regarding the management of e-learning virtual campuses based on the CANEGE experience. This chapter explores what the authors consider to be the most relevant aspects that need to be considered in relation to the establishment and implementation of virtual campus initiatives that comprise several partners.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-358-6.ch015

INTRODUCTION

In the fields benefiting from Information and Communication Technology over the past few years, e-learning has been one of the most important for universities. With a variety of online didactic resources for different types of public, this learning

method has progressively increased the number of degrees on offer. The variety of e-learning projects not only provides web-enhanced learning for current students but also provides solutions for adults who would like to obtain a degree without having enough time to attend tuition at a university (Lorenzo, 2006). In France, in 2000 and 2001, after two first calls for projects from the French Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Research, several universities decided to work together and create a virtual campus (Thibault, 2007). They proposed a five-year cycle of degrees in Economics and Management: modular, computer-based, flexible access, at distance, with ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and capitalisation. These universities promoted learning favouring educational programmes adaptable to each individual, thanks to suitable didactic resources and teaching methods focused on learners' specificities. They also developed training courses for both the administrative staff and the teachers involved in the project. Among successful projects, CANEGE – *CAmpus Numérique en Economie-GEstion*[1] – is an original collaborative experience between several French institutions organised as a network (Grevet, 2005).

The CANEGE campus that offers fully online degrees, is based on a consortium contract which initially comprised six universities and the *Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance* (CNED)[2]. In 2004 it was recognised as an example of "best practice" by the e-learning programme in Higher Education "Virtual Models of European Universities" (PLS Ramboll Management, 2004), and described and presented as a network structure in a recent paper (Fulconis & Garrot, 2008). These two facts give the authors the opportunity to study the functioning and management of this virtual campus in detail using the theoretical framework on which network organisations are based (Jarillo, 1993; Miles & Snow, 1986; 1992; Powell, 1990; Thorelli, 1986). The CANEGE project, which was the basis for our study is outlined using an "HPAC" observation grid, whose main components are Heterogeneity, Partnership, Autonomy and Cohesion. The chapter will also provide a diagnosis of its functioning and then propose strategic and operational recommendations to improve the management of this consortium and, more widely, virtual campuses, as well as highlighting best practices. Finally, the chapter will consider the future of virtual campuses both within the French e-learning field and within the wider European context.

BACKGROUND

Like other examples of network structures, the CANEGE project goes beyond the notion of organisation borders. It resorts to approaches in terms of resource pooling, process management, partnerships and more widely of "*extended firms"* (Capraro & Baglin, 2003). Indeed, the participating universities and the CNED are mobilised with the aim of organising and coordinating the assets and competences necessary to carry out their common project of a virtual campus, offering on-line qualifying education in Economics and Management. If this digital campus has been subjected to research in Education Science from a socio-economic point of view (Grevet, 2005), it has not been studied as a network structure using the theoretical frameworks of Management Science. From an analytical point of view, it is undeniable that the research in Economics, (Aoki, 1991; Piore & Sabel, 1989; Williamson, 1975) as well as in Sociology (Granovetter, 1985; Lazega, 1998; Thuderoz et al., 1999), contributes greatly to describing network structures. However, it does not provide much help with analysing their functioning in a much more operational context (Fréry, 1998; Fulconis & Paché, 2008; Paché & Paraponaris, 2006; Voisin et al., 2004). It is for this reason that the research into network structures carried out in the field of Management Science is used to understand the CANEGE project better.