

THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Models &
Messages

Lessons from
Case Studies

CASE UPDATES

Edited by Susan D'Antoni

L'Université virtuelle en Pays de la Loire, France

Henri Ott and Pascal Geeraert

A consortium



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List of abbreviations

GIP	<i>Groupement d'intérêt public</i> (public interest group)
HELPER	Higher Education eLearning Practices in European Regions
LMD	Licence-Master-Doctorat
UVPL	Université virtuelle en Pays de la Loire (Pays de la Loire Virtual University)

Developments since 2003

1. L'Université virtuelle en Pays de la Loire and its context

1.1 Institutional context

The founders of l'Université virtuelle en Pays de la Loire (UVPL) always assumed that the consortium would grow to include other higher education institutions in the Pays de la Loire region. This aim has not been forgotten: at a meeting on 31 March 2004, the Administrative Board of GIP Atlantech (Groupement d'intérêt public Atlantech), which provides UVPL with its logistical support, decided to incorporate the regional association of *grandes écoles*, the Conférence des Grandes Ecoles des Pays de la Loire, as a full partner. As a result, 15 graduate schools, with a total of 12,000 students and 900 *enseignants-chercheurs* (teacher-researchers), officially joined UVPL on 7 March 2005.

1.2 National context

In 2000, 2001 and 2002, the Ministry of Education called for national, subject-based, digital campuses as part of its policy for developing distance education and training. The establishment of these consortia gives rise, however, to difficulties in terms of organization and resource sharing. In the realm of open and distance provision, as in all other areas, the ministry took into account the fact that an association of universities that were geographically close and had a history of contact with each other was more likely to see projects through successfully and within a relatively short period. The result, in 2003, was a fresh national call for the establishment of Universités numériques en région (regionally based, digital universities). UVPL saw this initiative as recognition of the model that it had developed.

The continued development of the Bologna Process has resulted in a succession of new projects for UVPL. The establishment of the LMD (*Licence¹-Master-Doctorat*) system generated reflection and discussion regarding the content and structure of courses. As a result, the way they were organized, and in particular their modular structure, was re-examined. Seemingly as a natural outcome of this, the *enseignants-chercheurs* have gradually proposed new arrangements for open and distance provision.

1.3 International context

For both France and Europe, 2004 was noteworthy for the accession of ten new countries to the European Union. This did not have a direct impact on UVPL activities, as the countries concerned were already eligible to take part in several European programmes. It is possible, however, that future university relations will undergo more extensive development in which the experience of UVPL may be shared with institutions in the new member states.

2. Organization and current programmes

2.1 Organizational structure

The organization of UVPL, as described in the initial case study, has clearly demonstrated its effectiveness in terms of flexibility and adaptability.

¹ Bachelor's degree, obtained after three years of university studies.

Thought has been given to ensuring that the *grandes écoles* are represented in a way that preserves the balance of the existing decision-making and operational structure of the UVPL, at the same time as reflecting their relative contribution to the provision of higher education in the Pays de la Loire region.

2.2 Current programme

A collectively shared approach has become part of daily practice, as evidenced by collaboration between teachers attached to different institutions and the division of resources for the benefit of all students. This approach is also reflected in the formation of teams for an increasing number of projects, which bring together teachers and administrative staff from different partners and departments.

3. Administrative issues

3.1 Administration

In February 2003, UVPL decided to develop a targeted communications policy regarding its achievements, its operations and its services, so that it may become more widely known among the general public, the business sector, teachers, staff at institutions and, of course, students. It has followed a similar promotions strategy towards other national and foreign higher education institutions.

3.2 Costs and financing

The administrative boards of all UVPL member institutions have approved identical measures to establish the conditions governing financial responsibility for the remuneration of the teachers and technical staff engaged in devising content and the media used to deliver it, as well as for tutoring and support activities.

The UVPL budget has been maintained at the same level of 1.5 million euros a year, paid out by the Pays de la Loire regional council. This contribution is not the sole source of funding: institutions also contribute to the projects that they are involved in.

3.3 Technological infrastructure

The Single Sign-On procedure, described in the original case study, is fully operational. This means that some 70,000 students, teachers and administrative staff can connect to a personalized area on the UVPL portal, using the same login and password that they use for their own institutions.

3.4 Intellectual property ownership and copyright

In the continuing absence of clear national regulations, UVPL has produced its own rules governing dissemination of course materials and resources. Authors are required to sign an agreement that grants access to their materials to all students enrolled in the same subject, at the same level, at any one of the partner institutions. Several teachers offer entirely free access to their resources to any Internet user. For its part, UVPL formally agrees not to alter any content submitted.

4. Academic issues

4.1 Programme development

On 10 May 2004, 60 courses were available to Internet users, including 20 leading to full national qualifications. Around 30 new projects are in preparation, and the number of courses on offer has continued to grow: by 10 May 2005, 70 courses and 130 resources were available.

UVPL is constantly broadening its range of subjects, as well as the levels at which they are offered, and has taken advantage of the opportunity to form partnerships with other public and private institutions. From September 2004 onwards, it will make a forty-hour self-learning module on innovation and industrial ownership available to the public, in partnership with the Institut national de la propriété industrielle (National Institute for Industrial Ownership) and the Chambre régionale de commerce et d'industrie des Pays de la Loire (Regional Chamber of Commerce and Industry). This module may be freely accessed by any Internet user wishing to engage with these issues.

Other contacts have been established for non-traditional subject areas, at the request of outside bodies.

4.2 Teaching

Regular reliance on UVPL provision is beginning to spread within and between the constituent institutions and their departments. Thus medical teaching staff at the universities of Angers and Nantes have used the UVPL training platform to introduce personalized supervision of placements for in-class, fifth-year medical students. The platform constitutes the main area for students and their tutors to communicate with each other. Following the success of this first experiment, from the start of the next academic year teaching staff are thinking of extending the application to medical students in other years.

4.3 Learning

UVPL is developing several projects to communicate online learning and research methodologies to students. The principal initiatives cover management of documents, including how to search, access and cite references.

For over a year, UVPL has also been working to develop the skills of its staff, by establishing a set of special training modules for all teachers and staff involved in the organization of open and distance education provision, irrespective of their role. The annual UVPL symposium in July also contributes to this effort to train and inform staff from the partner institutions.

5. Cooperation

UVPL cooperates on a number of projects with other French and foreign higher education institutions. For example, classes of Vietnamese students are now enrolled for the *licence* in chemistry, while resources have been developed jointly with engineering schools in the Baltic countries.

The Pays de la Loire region and UVPL have also taken part in a project under the European Union Community Initiative, Interreg IIIC. On 26 April 2004, representatives from Switzerland, Lithuania, Scandinavia and Germany met to prepare HELPER (Higher

Education eLearning Practices in European Regions). Besides providing an opportunity to exchange distance learning methodologies, the project seeks to study means of transferring training modules from one country to another.

6. Future developments

UVPL plans to maximize the services it offers free of charge to both distance and in-class students. It is planning to provide students with as many methodological resources as possible to facilitate their studies and learning. Other matters under examination include the provision of support to students seeking to enter the workplace for the first time (e.g. training-linked placements or help with finding a first job).

7. Lessons learned

UVPL has now existed long enough for its practice and procedures to be meaningfully evaluated.

A full quality-assessment study has been carried out on one of the qualifications, the Licence professionnelle d'histoire médiateur du patrimoine (a professional undergraduate degree offering a historical perspective on cultural heritage). It has been made freely accessible on the UVPL website² in order to circulate findings and recommendations as widely as possible.

Examining the results of implementing open and distance learning in this way has proved to be of value for many aspects of teaching and learning in the partner institutions. As a result of these activities, for example, more and more teachers are altering their in-class teaching practice, while others have been inspired to undertake new projects.

UVPL encourages the use of existing online resources in its in-class teaching. It also supports projects with broader cultural goals. MUSEA, one of its first major achievements in this respect, is now available to all.³ A form of virtual museum, MUSEA enables students and teachers undertaking research to access a wealth of documents and resources, including multimedia materials.

UVPL is thus pursuing the policy it adopted when first set up: namely to work on behalf of all actors in higher education.

² Lopez, M. 2003. Radioscopie d'une FOAD. <http://www.uvpl.org/pagdiv.asp?ID=60&RESSOURCE>. (Accessed 30 July 2005.)

³ See <http://ead.univ-angers.fr/~musea/>.