

THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Models &
Messages

Lessons from
Case Studies

CASE UPDATES

Edited by Susan D'Antoni

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Spain

Albert Sangrà

A newly created institution



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International Institute
for Educational Planning

© UNESCO 2006

Table of contents

List of abbreviations	1
1. Context	2
2. Organization	2
3. Administrative issues	3
4. Academic issues	3
5. Cooperation	4
6. Future development and institutional change	4

List of abbreviations

EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EFQM	European Foundation of Quality Management
IN3	Internet Interdisciplinary Institute
NOF	Organization and Operation Rules
UOC	Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Open University of Catalonia)

Developments since 2003

In the last two years, the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) has developed some important strategies to better attain the vision of the university as outlined in the original case study.

UOC is still a very young university – its ten-year anniversary was celebrated during the 2004/2005 academic year. The most significant actions, therefore, have focused on consolidating the organizational, educational and technological model of this new brand of virtual university.

1. Context

Most conventional Spanish universities are rapidly developing their infrastructures and increasing the number of online courses they offer. However, none have yet been transformed to virtual universities; rather, online courses are being used to complement face-to-face teaching and learning or to widen the offer of elective courses.

The most important change at the national level has been the introduction of new regulations for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, in order to adapt the Spanish university system to the new European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Spanish universities, UOC included, are being challenged to compete at the European level.

UOC wants to face this challenge of internationalisation – an important issue in a networked world. To address this, the university has developed an institutional policy that includes the appointment of a new Vice-Rector for International Relationships and the creation of a new unit to support him and facilitate international operations. This initiative has two main aims:

- to give a consistent direction to the institutional strategic goal of raising the worldwide profile of the university;
- to support faculty initiatives, principally those related to joint academic ventures or international research projects, in which faculty members need strong support from the institution.

2. Organization

Changes have been made in order to strengthen the UOC's organizational model and face different and new challenges, both from the internal and external points of view.

Internally, professional development and career paths are now better defined for faculty members. A framework has been elaborated, detailing academic and professional competencies required for all faculty members. All professors, including those at the highest levels, are now subject to an evaluation process to better leverage their competencies, identify areas that would benefit from personal and professional development, and suggest suitable training activities.

UOC's Governing Board is aware that the skill set required of virtual university faculty members, including those at UOC, is slightly different to that needed by their colleagues in

conventional institutions. For this reason, teaching functions have been reorganised and new roles created. These include the roles of:

- Programme Director: a full UOC professor, with responsibility for the academic quality of a particular programme;
- Subject Responsible Professor: a full UOC professor, with responsibility for the organisation and validation of a particular subject; and,
- teaching collaborators (called “tutors” and “advisers”): professors from other universities collaborating with UOC.

Externally, UOC has worked to adapt its regulations to those of both regional and national government, particularly those aspects related to the legal model of the university. There have been two principal changes: the development of the so-called NOF (Organization and Operation Rules), which was approved by the regional government, and the amendment of the Letter of Rights and Duties of the members of the UOC community.

3. Administrative issues

Those that have read the original UOC case will remember that, when the university was created in 1995, we needed to develop our own electronic platform and technical architecture to respond to the needs of a fully virtual university. For this reason, one of the priorities of the last few years has been to evaluate and update our technological system. Since we have little in the way of ‘bricks-and-mortar’ infrastructure, updating the technical infrastructure is a permanent challenge.

The evaluation and analysis process began with a full consultation – listening to the voices of users (students, professors and management staff), technicians and well-known external experts – after which a working group was set up to produce a proposal for the update. The result of this process is a new version of the UOC’s Virtual CampusTM, incorporating new applications and functionalities, influenced by the different suggestions and demands voiced during the consultation. This, of course, will not be the last update, but we are confident that a good system has been developed and successfully tested.

4. Academic issues

Regarding academic issues (teaching and learning, and research), two important developments have been supported.

The first is connected to quality. The whole university is committed to the improvement of quality at all levels, from management staff in administrative processes, to faculty in teaching and learning processes and outcomes.

UOC had already applied for certification from the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM) and, after evaluation, been awarded the EFQM ‘Golden Seal of Excellence’. The university has also sought validation from other accreditation and certification organizations, including the European Universities Association. The Tourism degree programme has also been awarded the TedQual Certificate. Finally, UOC is working with the Spanish National Agency for Quality and Evaluation and the Catalan Agency for Quality in the Universities, to define quality criteria and indicators for the new Spanish and Catalan online programmes.

The second development regards research. After creating the research institute (the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute – IN3), strategic research themes have been defined, in particular Networking Society, Net Technologies, e-Law, e-Cultures and e-Learning. This final theme is structured around three areas: Policy, planning and management; Teaching and learning, and Web content and technologies.

Since UOC is a very young university, with a research reputation to establish, it has sought to attract well-known experts to guide and promote the research themes in their initial stages. In particular, Dr. Manuel Castells, has come from the University of California at Berkeley, to lead the Networking Society theme, while Dr. Tony Bates, from the University of British Columbia, leads e-Learning.

Finally, new programmes have been developed in the fields of Telecommunications Engineering and Public Relations. The breadth of the new UOC offer consolidates the vision of a university that responds to a wide range of student needs and covers a wide range of teaching and research fields.

5. Cooperation

UOC is very committed to its societal mission. As a technology-based university, it is committed to facing social problems, in particular to minimizing the effects of the Digital Divide.

A ‘UOC Cooperation’ department has been created to this end. UOC devotes 0.7 per cent of its budget to direct cooperative activities with different countries worldwide. Indirectly, 1.2 per cent of its budget goes to cooperative activities. These activities include the development of a net of volunteers (students and professors) to act as teachers and trainers in projects in Latin America and Africa. We believe that this is a true demonstration of how solidarity can be developed through the Internet.

6. Future development and institutional change

As mentioned earlier, the most important challenge that we face is harmonization with the EHEA. UOC is working hard to bring its degrees into line with both Spanish regulations and European Commission recommendations. The ‘spirit of Bologna’, however, fits very well with the vision, the mission and the strategies of the UOC. More and more European students will be learning online in the future. Virtual universities like UOC, therefore, have a great opportunity to become a point of reference to the European university system.