

THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Models &
Messages

Lessons from
Case Studies

CASE UPDATES

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Universidad Virtual de Quilmes, Argentina

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An evolution of an existing institution



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International Institute
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List of abbreviations

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
UNQ	Universidad Nacional de Quilmes (Quilmes National University)
UOC	Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Open University of Catalonia)
UVQ	Universidad Virtual de Quilmes (Quilmes Virtual University)

Developments since 2003

1. Universidad Virtual de Quilmes and its context

The macroeconomics of Argentina have changed. Argentina defaulted on its public foreign-current debt early in 2002. After a decade of peso-to-dollar parity its currency was devalued and the economy saw Gross Domestic Product (GDP) drop by roughly 11 per cent, with a recovery in 2003 (8 per cent growth) and in 2004 (expected GDP increase of more than 7 per cent).

During the 1990s, the telecommunications market had reached a growth of 31 per cent, especially in data transmission (up 113 per cent) and Internet use (up 287 per cent). Personal computer penetration rose to 5.3 per 100 inhabitants. The economic crisis of 2002, however, slowed the spread of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). According to the Information Society Index 2002, Argentina ranks 32nd out of the 55 countries that accounted for 98 per cent of the ICT use of a group of 150 countries. Considered per capita, however, Argentina is ahead of Chile in the number of hosts, of Uruguay in cell phones, and of Brazil in the number of telephones, computers and Internet servers.

The spread of ICTs increased exponentially last year for the first time since the crisis of 2002. The expansion of broadband and cellular technology was particularly notable. It can therefore be supposed that the new macroeconomic context did not affect the development of the communication and information systems that are the technical backbone of the delivery of virtual education.

The fall in incomes affected the demand for private university education. In fact, student enrolments for postgraduate courses charging tuition fees dropped significantly in 2002 and 2003, although a recovery was observed in 2004. As the Universidad Virtual de Quilmes (UVQ) is a programme offered by a free, public university, tuition fees remained unchanged after devaluation; that is, the amount charged in pesos did not change. This made it possible to maintain online course enrolments. In fact, the number of online off-campus students increased almost in parallel with the on-campus students.

The national university system has not seen any recent major improvement. There are almost 100 university institutions in total (38 public and 52 private). Student numbers have steadied at around 1.2 million, although the national population census of 2001 recorded only 900,000 people studying at university. The main reason for this discrepancy appears to be over-registration, as institutions continue to include in their statistics students that have left the university. Another, lesser reason is that some students study more than one university course.

The Universidad Nacional de Quilmes (UNQ) is a recently created institution, and therefore continues to expand into new academic areas. This has resulted in a rise in on-campus enrolment, from 3,960 in 1998 to 8,378 in 2004.

Off-campus university education has developed steadily, although it continues to account for a very low proportion of total student numbers. In 2002, it was estimated that fewer than 20,000 students (less than 2 per cent of all university students in Argentina) were enrolled in

'virtual' education. On the one hand, more institutions offer virtual university programmes and it is almost standard practice for universities to offer on-campus students the possibility of taking some of their courses online. On the other hand, Argentina still does not have a dedicated distance higher education institution. In addition to this, the national Ministry of Education has failed to disseminate specific regulations regarding distance learning activities, though new standards are to be adopted in the near future.

In conclusion, university enrolment in Argentina has stabilized at nearly 20 per cent of the population aged 18 to 24. It should be noted that the gradual strengthening of compulsory quality assessment of undergraduate courses in the fields of medicine, engineering and others considered by federal law to be in the public interest, is prompting institutions to replace automatic, direct admission with entrance examinations and quota systems (*numerus clausus*).

2. Organization and current programmes

Regarding the institutional context, changes have been made to the administration of the university, concluding the lengthy period of management by former Rector Julio Villar, who spearheaded groundbreaking and ambitious development. Under his leadership, and against a backdrop of conservatism among the traditional, state universities of Argentina, the UNQ generated joint technology ventures not only in electronic data processing but also in biotechnology and marine architecture. He also pioneered a modern teaching staff policy (for example, fees were paid based on the opportunity cost of each teacher).

The transitional management, which ceased at the end of 2004, had a different approach to university administration, aimed at curbing the expansion of new institutional activities and dissolving the joint ventures, including Campus Virtual SA, which administers the UVQ. For example, Servicios Virtuales SA, the company set up to develop software, was shut down.

The organizational structure of the UVQ remains otherwise unchanged, as does its academic and administrative management.

3. Administrative issues

As reported in the original case study, growing enrolments mean that the income from students will be enough to cover all costs. Budget lines have remained relatively stable: despite the devaluation of the national currency, costs for teaching and non-teaching staff did not rise, nor did the cost of communications. Furthermore, there have been no increases in enrolment fees. No royalties were paid for the use of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya's (UOC's) data-processing platform and these will probably continue to be waived.

In August 2004, the UVQ gained a new virtual campus, with a new graphic interface and redesigned content layout, thus ending reliance on an international technology provider.

The new campus improves the relationship between the academic and administrative management systems and the educational platform. It also aims to facilitate navigation: it is supported by new servers that will make browsing faster and more efficient.

The new platform will give the UVQ more technological and management autonomy. It is a complex, logical-integral technological platform. It includes a series of standardized yet flexible applications developed specifically for the management and development of teaching

and learning. It operates using a strong data structure, supplemented by an ad hoc academic management system to cover the technical administration of the virtual campus. For technical, safety and data back-up reasons, this is a stand-alone system.

The graphic interface of the virtual campus has been redesigned. The new content layout enables students, professors, researchers and administrators to use applications more easily, and gives various points of access to classes, services, forums and institutional information. For this first stage, the UVQ has decided to continue to follow the campus operating procedures of the platform provided by the UOC. For instance, classes will occupy the same spaces as they do currently, and class participation will follow procedures similar to those now used. This is so that the change of technology will not disrupt the preferred practices and routines of each user. Further innovations will be phased in later on.

The data- and user-migration process from the current system to the new environment will require the UVQ to cease activities for ten days.

All classes, course content and e-mail messages will be located at <http://www.virtualunq.edu.ar>. The system will replace the @cvq.edu.ar suffix: with @uvq.edu.ar.

Unlimited storage of messages is also being terminated and replaced by a storage quota for each type of user on the disks of the mail server. The volume assigned will match present averages (e.g. students will be allowed fifteen megabytes).

The users will be unaware of the myriad of technical changes to server programming and structure required to make the system more robust, speed up access and accelerate responses. The nomenclatures familiar to the 6,000 users have been maintained.

4. Academic issues

UNQ statistics indicate that in 2004 the institution had 13,264 students, of whom 4,886 were taking UVQ courses (more than double the figure of 2,400 two years previously). This means that UVQ students accounted for 37 per cent of the total enrolment – only slightly down from the 40 per cent registered in 2001.

The online programme has been expanded:

- five postgraduate specialization courses have been created in education, sociology, history and petrochemicals;
- the national public accountant undergraduate course (Carrera de grado de Contador Público Nacional) was added to the seven undergraduate courses previously offered;
- short, ‘pre-degree’ university courses were created, leading to a Diplomado Universitario de Formación Docente (university graduate in teacher training) with specialization in a chosen subject (mathematics, Spanish language and literature, social sciences, natural sciences, etc.);
- the Consejo Superior de la Universidad (University Board) has decided to create *Maestrías* (Master’s) degrees in education, international economics and social sciences.

The UVQ has also started a secondary-level online course. This is a *bachillerato* (baccalaureate equivalent) for adults, and has already produced eleven graduates.

*Licenciaturas*¹ in education (1,671 students) and administration (1,037 students) represent 35 per cent of the total enrolment in online courses. In addition to this, about 1,100 on-campus students also take virtual courses. There are currently some 691 virtual classes operating, with a faculty of 82 teacher-consultants and 19 tutors. Finally, the UVQ has produced 921 graduates, 683 of whom were *licendiandos* in education.

5. Lessons learned

The UVQ is a consolidated programme, following a strategy of continuous academic improvement. The programme could withstand rigorous quality assessment, which cannot be said of other similar programmes. It has indeed been suggested that an international quality evaluation, performed by a committee of experts, should be carried out. The implementation of the forthcoming regulations on distance education will lead, in all probability, to the closure of other programmes that have not made structural modifications. This will not be the case for the UVQ.

However, society is still uncertain about the value of non-classroom education; its appeal remains limited. Prejudice prevails against this type of teaching and learning, even in large sections of the government. The dissemination of specific standards for distance education will help stop it being approached from the perspective and criteria applied to face-to-face education.

At the time of this writing, the UVQ expected soon to replace its electronic data processing platform with a new virtual campus, developed in Argentina – a genuine triumph for our technological independence.

The assessment of the possible institutional changes, especially the full incorporation of the UVQ into the administrative workings of the UNQ remains an outstanding issue. The eventual dissolution of the administrating company, Campus Virtual SA, will mean that the institution will receive tuition fees from online students. This will undoubtedly give rise to unnecessary conflicts, given the attachment of the public Argentine university system to free undergraduate studies. An alternative would be to replace Campus Virtual SA with a university foundation – to replace a business enterprise with a not-for-profit entity, thereby removing the possibility for conflict. The main difference is that unlike Campus Virtual SA, the foundation would not be able to create ambitious projects, such as investing in business activities (for instance, acquiring holdings in Internet Service Providers and software development companies).

¹ Until recently most Spanish and Argentine degree courses lasted five years. Students would be awarded a *diplomatura* (general degree) if they completed three years of study, and they would get their *licenciatura* (honours degree) after another two years. Now, under new *planes de estudio*, or curricula, *licenciaturas* take four years. The first two years are referred to as the *primer ciclo* and the final two years as the *segundo ciclo*.