

Infocut - UCP

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1. Facts about the institution

Name of institution	Infocut
URL of institution	www.infocut.pt
Country	Lisbon, Portugal
Number of Employees	5 (2 associate partners)
Revenue in 2005	300.000 €
Experiences with e-learning since	Since 3 years
Business sector	Software commercialization and maintenance
Target group/participants in b-learning	Teachers and other staff members from basic and secondary schools and vocational training centers (mainly public schools)
Content	Educational Sciences - specialization on Educational Technology
Form	B-Learning
Interviewed people	<p>Carlos Simão is a student from the master on Educational Sciences. At this moment, Carlos is developing his thesis.</p> <p>José Lagarto is an Associate Professor, invited by the Portuguese Catholic University - Institute of Education Sciences to coordinate the Master in Educational Technology. With a PhD in Educational Science and a specialization on Systems and Training Organization, Prof. Lagarto is a well know expert in this field in Portugal.</p>

2. Description of how the institution has used e-learning

2.1. Description of e-learning courses provided

Carlos Simão is the Infocut CEO, a small enterprise active in the field of software commercialization and provision of consulting and implementation software services to basic and secondary schools, mainly from Lisbon area.

During the last 10 years, Carlos has been involved in several projects providing technologic and technical support to public schools.

Lately he felt the need to improve his own knowledge about the pedagogical aspects of learning technologies as well as to improve his skills in the ICT's field applied to teacher and trainers continuing vocational training.

So, Carlos decided to attend the master on Educational Technology. The reasons behind the choice of a b-learning training solution are clear: flexibility provided by the b-learning methodology; congruency with his learning style and time available to explore the contents; the possibility of working in asynchronous and synchronous environments.

For the company, the advantages with the b-learning experience were evident since Carlos is the company CEO and, at the same time, he is the responsible for the company marketing and sales policy and customer service.

The Master in Educational Technology is promoted by the Institute of Education Sciences of the Portuguese Catholic University. The main objectives are:

- To offer post-graduated training courses to the Portuguese education and vocational training wider community;
- To create conditions for an ICT's teaching specialization of the education and vocational training providers;
- To develop studies and research in the specific area of education and ICT's.

At the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Recognize the importance of the Learning Psychology Theories and promote the connection between those approaches and the regular use of computers as a teaching support;
- Demonstrate how internet and multimedia technologies can be applied in learning and teaching process;
- Use the computer as a creativity and inductive thinking facilitator;
- Use the Internet and other networks as supporting tools to the research and learning and teaching process;
- Develop education and vocational training programs using ICT's;
- Plan and manage the training process;
- Select suitable methodologies to conceive, implement and evaluate e-learning and b-learning courses.

The Master provides contents from the following topics:

- Conception of multimedia materials for the web;
- Didactics on ICT's;
- Distance learning and e-learning;
- Education research methodologies;
- Hardware and networks basic foundations;
- Internet and education;
- Learning Psychology;
- Project seminar;
- Software basic foundations.

The Master follows a modular structure and is organized on 4 trimesters with 2 disciplines per trimester. The course assessment is both formative and final, respectively, online and in presence.

2.2. Number of employees involved in each of the courses

143 students attended the Master in Educational Technology. Carlos Simão was the only Infocut employee enrolled in the Master.

2.3. Description of e-learning platform and other relevant technology issues

The course is hosted by the UCP website and the virtual environment powered by the Blackboard Academic Suite platform.

The Blackboard is a fully integrated, open architected solution. The platform enables the administration team (coordination team and professors responsible for each discipline) to create, publish and manage the course contents, create the assessment tools and promote the communication with students.

The course is available through a Internet Explorer web browser; no other software is needed.



Fig 1. Screen shot - entrance page of the Blackboard Academic Suite platform.

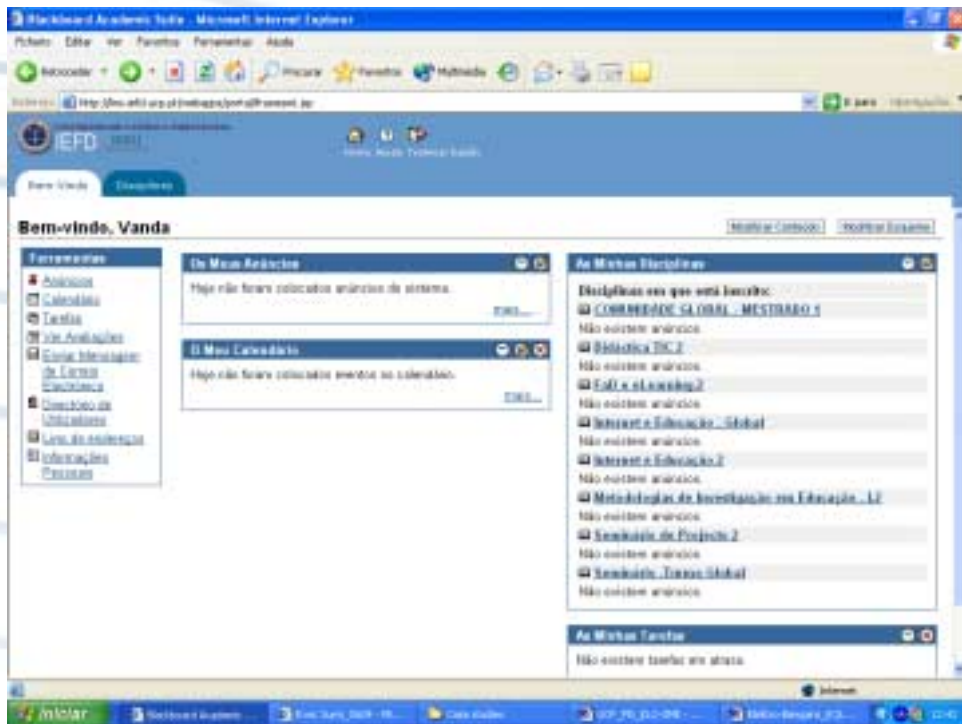


Fig 2. Screen shot - home page of the MBA in Educational Technology.

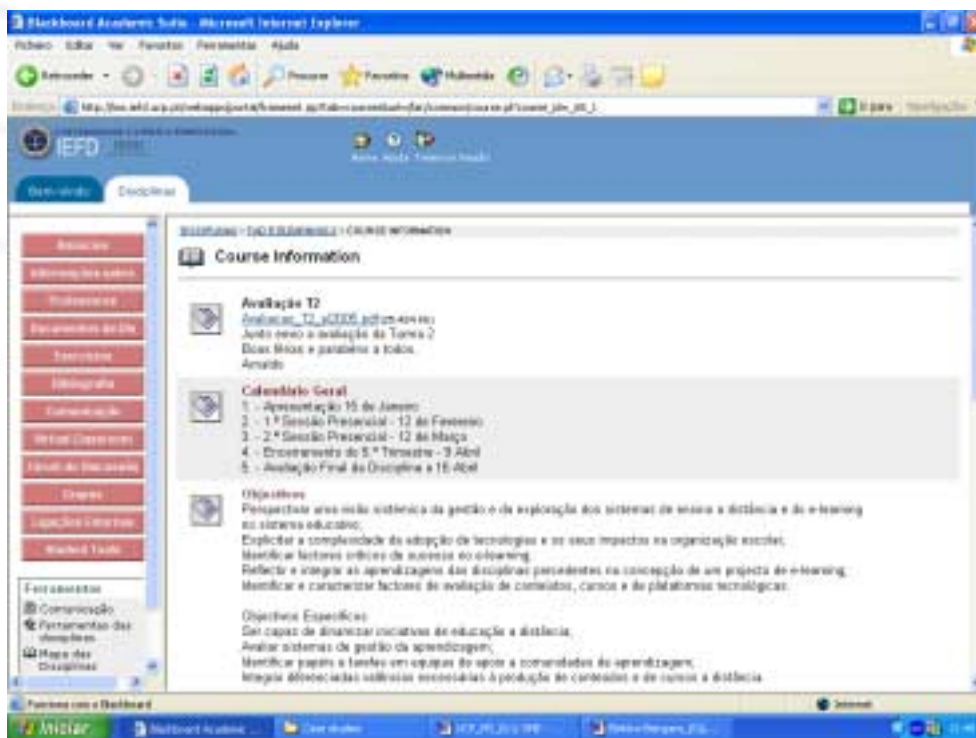


Fig 3. Screen shot - one course topic of the MBA in Educational Technology.

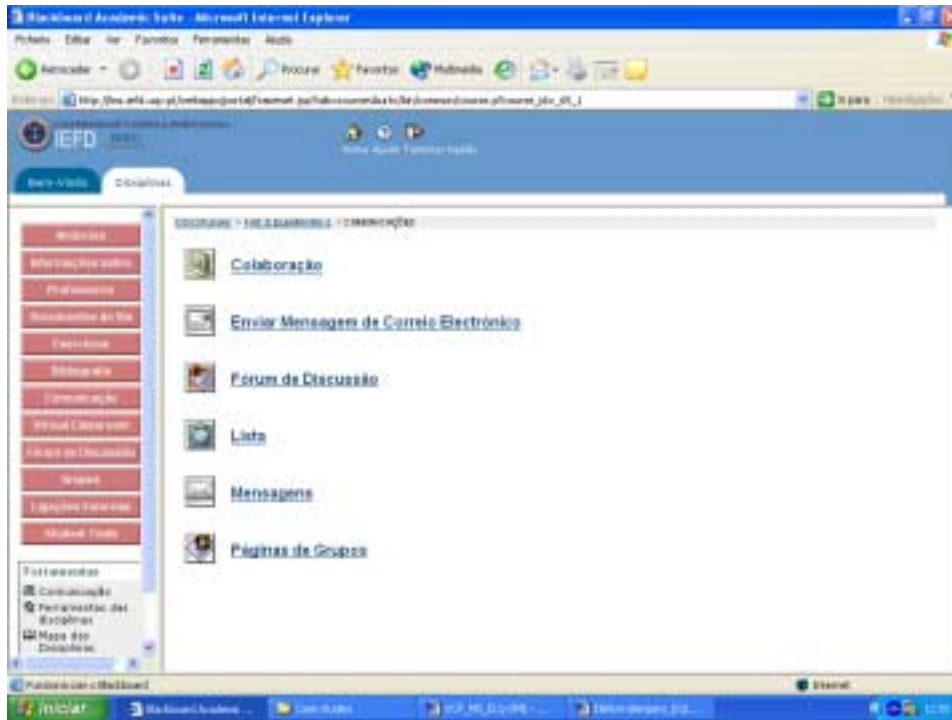


Fig 4. Screen shot - Communication tools of the MBA in Educational Technology.

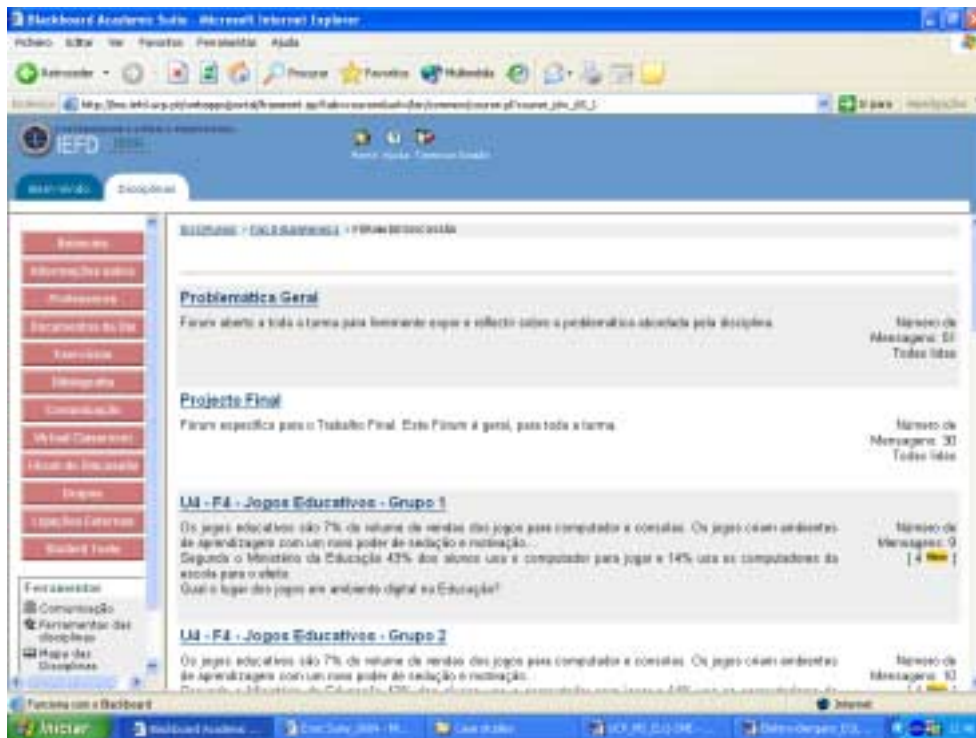


Fig 5. Screen shot - Forum room of the MBA in Educational Technology.

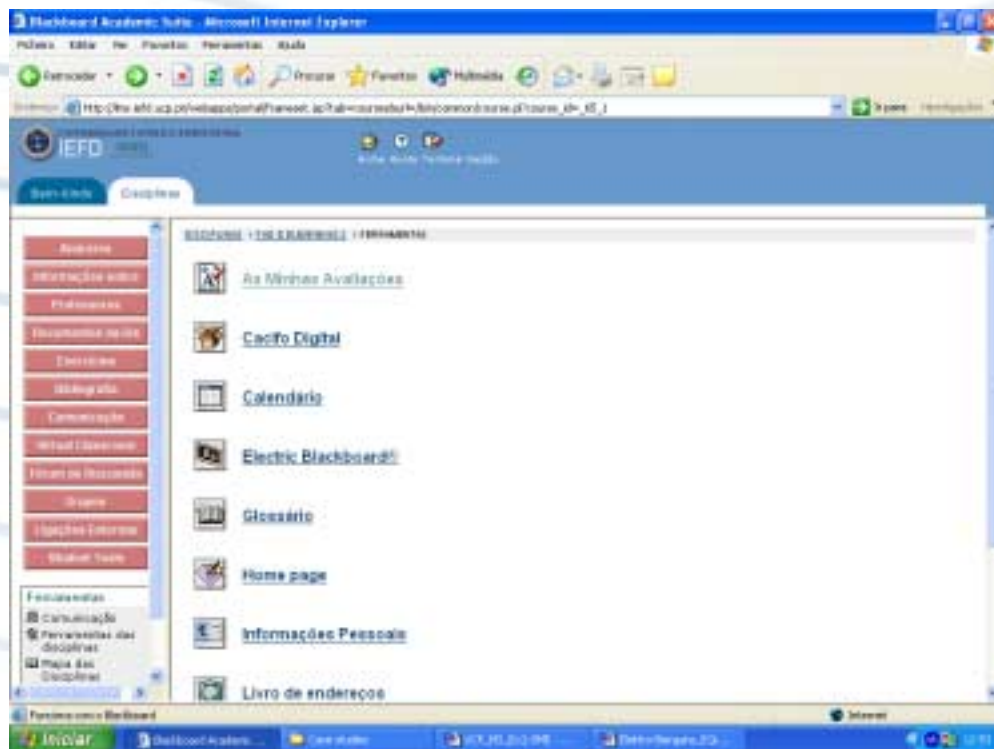


Fig 6. Screen shot - Student tools of the MBA in Educational Technology (assessments, calendar, glossary, personal information, etc).

2.4. Description of the course development process

The Master was promoted through the UCP – Institute of Educational webpage (www.ucp.pt) and also through several advertisements in one of the most important weekly newspapers in Portugal.

For the Master presentation, the coordination team organized a Seminar in order to present the entire course (structure; functionalities; pedagogical, technical and technological support, etc.) to the students and the set of professors, teachers and tutors from each discipline.

The students were distributed in 5 classes (4 in Lisbon and 1 in Oporto) and each class was divided in 4 or 5 groups. The groups were composed by 4 to 7 elements.

The Master curricular part took 18 months and the development of the thesis is planned for 1 year.

The students spent 14 hours a week in self study (in average). The traditional training classes were provided on Saturdays and some Seminars were also organized on Friday's afternoon.

About the course development process, José Lagarto stated that there were the following basic assumptions/considerations:

1. Each discipline was conceived and developed by the Master coordination and professor responsible. The coordination team was responsible also for the conception and development of the contents and materials. In each discipline there was also a tutor to monitor the training and provide feedback and support to the students (tutorial system);

2. All disciplines follow a work plan with learning objectives, modules and units, proper materials (graphics, audio, video, power point presentations, reports, etc.) and tools to foster the communication and the support among members of the learning community;
3. All disciplines use asynchronous and synchronous tools: forums and chats were intensively used since the beginning of the course (e-mails between trainees and with tutors or teachers are discouraged);
4. All disciplines provide a set of resources, library items and references, links to explore further information;
5. In all disciplines tutors track students' results and provide up-date feedback.

2.5. Description of the course administration process

All students must be registered. The management of user names and passwords is made by an internal technical administrative office. Students are able to modify their passwords.

The platform offers, in one hand, a system student's database to storage and make data retrieval of assignments, online questionnaires, students and teacher information, forums participation and emails exchanged through the platform.

On the other hand, all course materials are stored for post consultations.

In some disciplines, online assessment is used for comparative analysis and learning results monitoring. Final exams are mostly developed in traditional training classes (paper and pencil exams, with or without consultation). Online final exams can also be completed in the classroom but with tutors' supervision.

Another important administration issue is the information about payments. At this moment, invoicing and payment of the course fees are available through ATM (automatic teller machine) or directly in the University administrative services.

3. Direct and indirect effects and outcomes of the e-learning activities

3.1. Completion rates

143 students enrolled in the course; 119 students finished the course.

3.2. Satisfaction

Carlos Simão stated that the course was important to enlarge his skills and knowledge about specific tools and pedagogical techniques, for example, MODE and DOKEOS.

At the beginning of the course, Carlos' motivation was to get experience as distance student. During the course, his motivation decreased especially because of the long training duration. Carlos expected to get more practical knowledge and in-deep contents development in some of the learning topics. However, some factors were essential to maintain his motivation and interest along the training process: the role of the coordinator, the good relationships developed with all professors/teachers/tutors and other students, and finally, his wife and family support.

The company level of satisfaction with the course is directly related with the potentiality to transfer this knowledge to other company employees.

Nowadays, as HR manager, Carlos considers b-learning/e-learning solution as his 1st option to answer to some employee specific training needs.

Carlos considers b-learning/e-learning a good methodology to train technical competencies (hardware, networks or competencies in a specific software): However, he considers that traditional training is more efficient to train “soft skills” (customer service or negotiation and sales techniques).

4. Challenges and barriers

In Infocut and for Carlos Simão the biggest obstacles to the development of e-learning training solutions are seen in two ways:

- There is already available in the Portuguese market some distance learning courses. However, there is still a deficient information policy regarding e-Learning solutions for SMEs;
- Carlos considers that it is easier to train and involve trainees without any prior ICT experience than trainees who use ICT for pleasure, entertainment or to develop basic tasks, because those people get into bad habits concerning ICT use.

In Infocut and for Carlos Simão the main challenge is:

- Technical solutions are very easy to adapt and there are already in the Portuguese market good solutions and good tutors and trainers. The main challenge is to overcome human resistance to the concept of e-learning.

5. Success factors

Nowadays in Portugal, e-learning is really moving and growing, in particular, the initiatives addressed to the continuing vocational training and to the improvement of trainers and teachers skills and competences.

The 1st success factor results from a winning combination between a realist assessment of the target group’s needs and the development of low prices/investments e-learning solutions.

The 2nd success factor lies on a growing e-learning market of assistance and administrative staff of public and private schools and SME’s less qualified workers.

6. E-learning investments, development costs and operational costs

Carlos Simão supported all Master costs and fees. However, he is already getting some return on his investment. Carlos is now on the process of creating a new business with one colleague from the Master aiming to promote b-learning/e-learning courses to teachers, professors and tutors.

Carlos Simão thinks that e-learning will be the future of the education and training in Portugal and he presents the following arguments to stress his position:

- *“Imagine you have a SME as customer and you want to sell e-learning courses. According to the Portuguese legislation, it’s compulsory to have a minimum of 35 training hours per employee per year”;*
- *“As usual, employers want to reduce costs and don’t like to have their employees out of the office, for many reasons...”;*
- *“E-learning, even to SMEs, is a great solution since this training methodology provides:*
 - *Costs reduction in the transportation expenses;*
 - *Employees receive training courses in the work place and they don’t need to be out of the office during 35 hours. As manager you can’t say to your customers:” sorry but I can’t solve your problem now because my employees are attending a training course all week and there is anyone else to help you”...*
 - *During the training, coordinators/supervisors can follow the course and monitor the learning improvement and also try to adapt, more easily, the course content to the company needs;*
 - *Finally, the manager can select training providers with a long list of courses and experience and select the best training option according to the employees needs. The manager will be more demanding when he/she is paying for the course.*