



EDUCATION AND CULTURE

## **LEONARDO DA VINCI**

**Project: Megatrends in E-Learning Provision**

[www.nettskolen.com/in\\_english/megatrends](http://www.nettskolen.com/in_english/megatrends)

### Discontinued Initiatives

#### **CVU - California Virtual University**

([www.california.edu](http://www.california.edu); the URL does not work any longer)

##### **Introduction**

In the year 2004/2005 California had more than 600 postsecondary education institutions, both public and private. The total fall enrolment in both public and private degree-granting institutions in 2004 was almost 2, 5 million.<sup>1</sup>

The California Virtual University is an example of an e-learning consortium in which consortium members delegate the tasks of advertising and offering their online courses to a predominant entity. It represents a low level of institutional integration where revenue sharing, adapted scheduling, common admission criteria, comparable quality standards and transferable accreditation criteria are not relevant. Every consortium member keeps full independence and deals the whole range of academic services and obligations once a student has made the way through the CVU-Website and arrived to the member's enrolment system.

##### **Historical context**

California Virtual University started its activities in September 1997 with the aim of featuring the online distance education for all California accredited colleges and universities.

The project was a result of the efforts undertaken by the Californian administration already in 1989 to define a State Policy on Technology for Distance Learning, directed by the California Postsecondary Education Commission. Due to funding cutbacks, distance learning plans could not be contemplated until 1996 when economical figures improved. The initiative was also moved by the problem of gaining 450.000 students over the following ten years and the difficulties to address their needs.

A California Virtual University Design Team was established in 1997 "with the charge of recommending a blueprint with somewhat vague needs.

*... by which California-based institutions of higher education may serve the needs of California students and employers through emerging technology-enhanced educational programs, as well as reach national and global demand for such programs and content (State of California, 1997)."*<sup>2</sup>

The declared aim was meeting changing student and business needs, providing access for the increased student population, and in increasing the quality of distance format courses.

After cutting back public financial support and trying turn the CVU into a non-profit foundation, the institution failed in maintaining private funding so that in March 1999 the University of California agreed to "keep CVU's homepage running on the Internet on the condition that the other public and private segments of higher

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<sup>1</sup> [California Post Secondary Education Commission](#)

<sup>2</sup> Berg, G.A. (1998): *Public Policy on Distance Learning in Higher Education: California State and Western Governors Association Initiatives*. [online article]. Education Policy analysis Archives, Vol. 6, N° 11. [last visit: March 16th, 2007]. < <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v6n11.html> >



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*education in the state would maintain and update their course offerings and information pages that are linked to CVU.*<sup>3</sup>

Today, the CVU's homepage does not exist any longer.

#### **1. Long history in online/distance/flexible education:**

The CVU itself was designed from scratch as a course broker. It relayed on the experience and the knowledge of the institutions that would offer their courses on the CVU's Website.

#### **2. High competence in online education:**

The broker system being the underlying structure of the CVU brought along as a consequence that the CVU itself did not get involved with educational issues at all. As the organization pulled together courses of a large number of different institutions, one can not identify a specific degree of competence in online education. Some of the collaborating institutions might have high competence; some might have very low competence. This system generated a very heterogeneous pool of offered courses, too. Far from creating a unified image of a common educational program, the CVU just bundled a large number of very different types of courses on its Website, where the only common line lived within the offers that came from one and the same collaborating institution.

#### **3. Evolutionary development:**

The CVU is the result of a political decision and did not undergo a step by step evolution.

#### **4. Continuing research and evaluation related to e-learning and online education:**

No information about possible research activity could be found.

#### **Technical issues**

The CVU-project was designed as a Web-based platform (a searchable catalogue) featuring online courses offered by other institutions. Detailed information about the technological implications of the project could not be found. An article in CNET-News mentions the corporate sponsors as advisors from a technology standpoint. It also points out that "the estimated cost to keep the catalogue running and enhanced with more automated features is about \$2 million per year"<sup>4</sup>.

#### **5. High competence in ICT:**

The gathered information does not give enough hints to come to a clear conclusion on this point. But it seems to be obvious that the main element of the CVU was a Web based course catalogue which certainly implies less technical complexity than a whole virtual campus or a powerful virtual learning environment.

<sup>3</sup> Colvin, T. (1999): *UC to maintain Virtual University Website* [online press release] University of California; Office of the President News. [last visit: March, 16<sup>th</sup> 2007]. <<http://www.ucop.edu/news/archives/1999/cvu.html>>

<sup>4</sup> Macavinta, C. (1998): *"Virtual University" gets boost*. [online article]. Cnet News. [last visit: March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007]. <<http://news.com.com/2100-1023-213885.html>>



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**6. Based on standard and widely-used technologies; widely-used technologies enable students to apply the software and hardware they have at their disposal with little need to buy and install additional equipment:**

An online catalogue does certainly not imply the use of special technical devices on the clients end.

**7. Well integrated ICT systems that support online education:**

The actual online education was carried out in the collaborating institutions, not really in the CVU.

**8. Effective administrative systems:**

We do not have enough information about the CVU's administrative systems to say anything about this factor.

### **Courses**

**9. Wide range of subjects and levels:**

In July 1998, the CVU launched its online catalogue with a total of 1600 courses, pulling together the Web-based distance-learning courses offered by 95 public and private universities in California<sup>5</sup>.

*"Students logging on to CVU at [www.california.edu](http://www.california.edu) will select from the four educational segments: UC, the California State University, the California Community Colleges system, and the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities. A mouse-click on one of the links will take students to the courses and information maintained by each of the segments."*<sup>6</sup>

According to accreditation, the CVU was completely dependent on the member institutions so that students studying via this institution would receive credit not from the CVU but from the university or college that offered the course or program on the CVU linkup.

**10. Wise choice of topics, courses and programmes that are "onlineable":**

The CVU completely depended on the choices of the collaborating institutions. As far as we can assume from the gathered information, the CVU had no kind of influence in the program design of the collaborating institutions.

**11. Flexible student start-up and progression:**

We do not have any information about that aspect. However it can be supposed that start-up and progression depended on the organisation of every single collaborating institution.

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<sup>5</sup> Macavinta, C. (1998): "Virtual University" gets boost. [Online article]. Cnet News. [last visit: March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007]. <<http://news.com.com/2100-1023-213885.html>>

<sup>6</sup> Colvin, T. (1999): UC to maintain 'virtual university' Web site. [Online article]. University of California, Santa Cruz; Currents. [last visit: March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007]. <<http://www.ucsc.edu/oncampus/currents/98-99/04-05/ucop.virtual.htm>>



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### **12. Students' time flexibility leads to asynchronous communication and little focus on synchronous communication technologies:**

One can assume that with over 1500 courses coming from almost 100 different institutions that kept their complete independence regarding course design, there must have been a huge variety of different approaches, based both on synchronous and asynchronous communication.

### **Management, strategies and attitudes**

#### **13. Support form top management:**

The initiative of creating the CVU came from the central administration in California. However, the role of the Californian State Administration in the CVU initiative was intended to be minimal and the project should be directed by teams of teachers from UC, California State University, California community colleges and the Association of Independent California Colleges<sup>7</sup>. It might be an indicator for poor support that the 4 public universities in California and the state's private colleges refused to support the CVU financially when public money was cut back.

#### **14. Enthusiastic employees who believe in online education (little resistance):**

No information about this aspect could be found.

The CVU worked as a sort of administrative centre outside the actual university or college structure with the only function of advertising and administer the courses or degree programmes provided by the member institutions of the centre. The CVU could therefore save money on staff, development and delivery costs, student administration, accreditation and all the other tasks and responsibilities that are traditionally related with a higher education institution. Richard Bothel describes this model, sometimes named "broker model" in the following way:

*"A limited staff maintains the "University," but extensive dollars are spent in advertising and promotion. Some type of infrastructure will be established to exhibit courses, but it does not necessarily include extensive hardware and networking infrastructure."*<sup>8</sup>

Stephen Downes mentions a lack of strategy in the sense that it was never really clear what the CVU was intended to be. The range goes from just a database to "the Amazon.com of the technology-mediated education in California"<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Raine, G. (1998): *A study in success State's virtual "university" graduates to a new level*. [Online article]. SFGate - San Francisco Chronicle. [last visit: March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007].

<<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/examiner/archive/1998/07/30/BUSINESS15111.dtl>>

<sup>8</sup> Bothel, Richard (2001): *Bringing It All Together*. [Online article]. Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume IV, Number I. [last visit: March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007].

<<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring41/bothel41.html>>

<sup>9</sup> Macavinta, C. (1998): *"Virtual University" gets boost*. [Online article]. Cnet News. [Last visit: March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007].

<<http://news.com.com/2100-1023-213885.html>>



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**15. Strategies that support online education and employees that are loyal to the strategy:**

The CVU as entity that merely advertised and offered courses designed and run by others did not develop any strategy to support online education.

**16. Focus (strategy, control and management) on quality:**

As far as we can see from the information that could be found, the CVU did not make any effort to create a homogeneous course offer in terms of format and quality. It limited its activity to advertising courses and redirecting students to the respective institutions.

**17. Effective administrative routines:**

We do not have enough information about the ITFK's administrative routines to say anything about this factor.

**18. Some sort of industrialization (division of labour, systematization, automation, rationalization, work flow management):**

Within the "consortium" created with the CVU one could assume that outsourcing and centralizing the publicity and administration of the courses offered by the member institutions is a sort of division of labour. Nevertheless it has to be said that the members seem to have kept their own Websites running in parallel so that once a student was captured, the service offered by the CVU became completely obsolete.

**19. Focus on predictable and manageable teacher workload:**

The CVU did not get involved with teaching.

**20. Collaboration with other institutions:**

The broker model is based on collaboration regarding the advertisement and administration of member courses. Collaboration in the sense of offering commonly developed courses or regarding the exchange of knowledge and experience could not be identified.

**21. High credibility (formal and informal) with the government and public administration:**

The initiative of creating the CVU came from the Californian Government. In that sense, credibility was total. Nevertheless, the CVU was not intended to depend on public funding for a long time. Following that strategy, the organization was left on its own after an initial phase of financial support. Even when closure of the activities was imminent, the public sector did not intervene anymore. This might be an indicator of reduced credibility. An institution considered vital for the needs of the Californian academic community might have received another backing.



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### **Economy**

#### **22. Cost-effective courses:**

Cost effectiveness was nothing the CVU had to deal with. This aspect was completely dependent from the members' institutions.

#### **23. Stable and predictable sources of income from operation of online education:**

The creation of the CVU was backed by a 6,1 million dollar injection from the State's 1998/99 budget. Stephen Downes<sup>10</sup> calls this a considerable amount taking into account the fact that the CVU had no design or delivery expenses regarding the courses offered on its Website. On the other hand, the CVU had no income from online education provision, because this aspect was solely covered by the member institutions.

#### **24. Pressure on the necessity to change to stay in business and flexibility to adapt to changing markets:**

In the context of the Californian State Policy on Technology for Distance Learning, the private sector was encouraged from the beginning to collaborate with the educational institutions, and so with the CVU, in the use of technology, but this approach created considerable criticism by faculty groups and parties concerned with the business ties that could be established as a result of such joined ventures.

*"In a separate but related effort called the California Educational Technology Initiative (CETI), the CSU (California State University) system proposed an agreement with corporate sponsors to provide an infrastructure for distance learning at CSU campuses."*<sup>11</sup>

The proposal had to be revised and Microsoft pulled out of the venture.<sup>12</sup>

Also the CVU was supposed to be turned over a non-profit foundation without any further public funding. Instead, a number of private sponsors like Sun Microsystems, Microsoft, Pacific Bell, KPMG Consulting, and International Thomson Publishing and Oracle<sup>13</sup> agreed to join the project which was announced as a good example for partnership between industry and education.

Nevertheless, this joined venture between companies and the CVU did not succeed due to the resistance of the educational institutions against any possibility of "locking them into exclusive providers or one kind of technology"<sup>14</sup>. Instead, private colleges and the three Californian public universities were approached to help out with financial support, again without any success.

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<sup>10</sup> Downes, S. (1999): *What happened at California Virtual University?* [Online article]. Author's Website. [Last visit: March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007]. <<http://www.downes.ca/post/270>>

<sup>11</sup> Berg, 1998

<sup>12</sup> Burdman, P. (1998): *Microsoft Abandons CSU Venture But plan to link up college campuses still on drawing board.* [online article] SFGate - San Francisco Chronicle. [las visit: March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007]. <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/1998/04/17/BU104630.DTL>>

<sup>13</sup> Macavinta, C. (1998): *California Virtual University gets boost from tech giants.* [Online article]. Cnet News. [last visit: March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007]. <<http://news.com.com/2110-1023-207190.html>>

<sup>14</sup> Downes, 1999.



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In a final attempt, the CVU was supposed to support itself by e-commerce and advertising through its Website. In 1999, the institution suspended its activities.

#### **25. Flexible employment and use of part time teaching staff to adapt to changes in market:**

No information about this aspect could be found.

#### **Conclusions**

From the gathered information it seems possible that the reasons for suspending the CVU's activities can be:

- **A lack of definition:** What was the CVU intended to be?
- **A lack of quality and coherence:** The "broker model" offers "one-stop degree shopping and tends to involve less inter-institutional conflict"<sup>15</sup> than other models but award degrees and offer centralized student and academic services at the same time. On the other hand it increases the risk of duplication of courses offered by different member institutions. A result of this approach could be what Berg describes as a "hodgepodge catalogue of previously existing courses with great differences in format and quality."<sup>16</sup> Dependence on the member organizations made that the CVU "did not have the institutional autonomy to set its own direction or develop policy appropriate to its medium."<sup>17</sup>
- **Inadequate prevision and planning of the financial and business aspects:** Without external funding, the CVU approach was not sustainable. The negative response of California's private colleges and public universities regarding CVU's needs of funding<sup>18</sup> might be related with the relatively weak position of the institution due to its own structure and relation with its members: With each institution offering courses from its own site, students did not have any reason to return to the CVU's portal once they had started a course. In addition, this lack of need to use the CVU-site any further than to establish the contact to a member's site made it very difficult to develop a successful e-commerce segment.

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<sup>15</sup> Hill Duin, A./Bear, L. (2000): *Virtual U. Creating the Minnesota Virtual University - Assessing Results and Readiness Criteria*. [Online article]. Educause Quarterly, Number 1, 2000. [Last visit: March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007]. <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eq/a001/eqm0012.pdf>>

<sup>16</sup> Berg, 1998

<sup>17</sup> Downes, S. (1999): *What happened at California Virtual University?* [Online article]. Author's Website. [Last visit: March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007]. <<http://www.downes.ca/post/270>>

<sup>18</sup> "[...] when Stanley A. Chodorow arrived as the virtual university's first CEO, he found it without any financial means of support. So he asked private colleges and the three public segments--the University of California, Cal State and community colleges--to collectively chip in \$1 million a year for three years while he built up advertising and book-sales revenues. The colleges and universities balked, and CVU, with no money for its operations, folded up its tent, leaving only the directory." (Downes, 1999)



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