



EDUCATION AND CULTURE

LEONARDO DA VINCI

Second phase:2000-2006

Megatrends in E-Learning Provision

www.nettskolen.com/in_english/megatrends

UNED - Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Case study)

Facts about the institution

Name of institution	Universidad Nacional de Educación a distancia (UNED)
URL of institution	www.uned.es
Country	Spain
Levels in the education system	Higher education level
Number of employees	About 8000 lecturers and tutors

Introduction

The UNED is currently Spain's largest university with almost 180.000 students. Starting its activity in the early seventies in the field of traditional distance education, the UNED has experienced a spectacular growth in geographical presence and student numbers. The figures led to an increasing use of ICT and consequently to the installation of a virtual campus in the year 2000. The process of virtualization that aimed to provide all courses in an online format has recently concluded.





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The institution understands distance education as an opportunity to reach two important goals:

- a) Equal opportunities - distance education opens training possibilities to people with low income, remote place of residence or other difficulties. In this context, the institution has especially supported the incorporation of women into the university and the labour market.
- b) Flexibility - most of the students that enrol in the institution's study programs need to combine work and studies. Distance education opens a second opportunity to those who are interested or in need of higher education and for some reason did not benefit of it before their integration into the labour market.

The UNED's educational program provides studies in 26 degrees and over 500 courses in the field of lifelong learning.

Contextual factors concerning online education in Spain

The total population of Spain is 40 million. Spanish is the common language in all 17 autonomous regions, three of which have their own language with official status within the region.

There are currently 70 universities in Spain, 48 of which are public. The total number of registered students in Spanish universities for the academic year 2004/05 was 1.535.626.

The results of the European e-user-Project¹ describe the diffusion of ICT in Spain unsatisfactory due to the low penetration of Internet in the households in comparison to the other EU members which could be related to the high prices of Internet connection.

Broadband diffusion, however, has been comparatively fast in the last three years, in particular in the more developed and urban parts of the country such as Catalonia and Madrid.

The same study reports considerably big disparities in access to and use of the Internet between sub-segments of the population e.g. genders, age groups, socio-economic groups etc.

The acceptance of e-learning within university students can be considered as relatively high. In spite of the lack of diffusion of ICTs and the disparities mentioned above, the large number of e-learning initiatives in Spanish universities indicates a satisfactory level of acceptance of the use of ICT in teaching and learning among the academic community.

¹

www.euser-eu.org



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It can be assumed that digital literacy in the target group is relatively high. Spanish university students and teachers use computers and the Internet on a regular basis. However the percentage of the total number of Spanish people aged 16 to 74 that do not use the computer or the Internet is slightly higher than the same figure for the UE-25.²

Neither the central government nor the regional administrations are carrying out a specific policy in order to promoting e-learning. The projects that are being undertaken are more generic and only have an indirect effect on the development of e-learning. Examples are the provision of equipments and access to ICT for schools, the development of Internet courses and training, the support of innovation and development in educational applications of ICT, the cooperation between Latin America and Europe in the area of ICT in education, projects supported by the government through the European Social Fund and through the Spanish Continuing Training Foundation FORCEM, the promotion of ICTs in enterprises that offer e-learning courses through FORINTEL (a program created by the Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Commerce), or through the "Plan España.es" that promotes accessibility to training and digital contents.

History

The UNED was founded in 1972 as a public university in Madrid. After an initial process of consolidation and growth in numbers of enrolment the institution starts to deliver higher education to a population segment that lives in greater distance of the capital by creating regional centres that introduced distance education into the rest of the peninsula and the Canaries, providing free printed teaching materials via postal service. The regional centres offered face to face guidance and consultancy to the students in need of such service.

The next step was the internationalization of the services provided by the institution. The institution exports its pedagogical model to Latin America and becomes the leading member of the AIESAD, the Iberoamerican Association of Higher Distance Education).

The UNED always used to employ different means to support study, such as radio and TV, used as media to deliver contents. In the nineties, videoconferencing tools helped to create a network between the 60 associated centres.

² DEMUNTER, Christophe (2006): "How skilled are Europeans in using computers and the Internet?" [Online article]. In: *Statistics on focus. Industry, trade and services* 17/2006. (Data retrieved on 30/10/2006). URL: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-NP-06-017/EN/KS-NP-06-017-EN.PDF



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Recently ICT had been identified as tools that can offer a medium through which the student can solve problems and doubts, that help to provide additional learning materials, make communication possible and reduce the feeling of isolation that characterizes the distance learning student. Finally, ICT improve coordination between teachers and tutors and make it more agile.

On the background of these advantages and quickly increasing student numbers, the institution's virtual campus started in the year 2000. According to a virtualization plan all the compulsory courses had to be digitalized and available online. This gradual process has now concluded, which means that the use of e-learning is now virtually compulsory although officially the institutions policy does not oblige any student to pick up the offer of online courses.

Technical issues

The UNED's e-learning courses are based on technology that is available to the general public. The technical requirements on the client side do not include any special items. Every student has to have a computer able to read multimedia resources and equipped with a CD-Rom player, apart from a reliable Internet connection.

The institution's virtual campus combines a WebCT/Blackboard platform with its own development (aLF based upon dotLRN). At this moment in time a high level of integration has been achieved between the online courses and the databases underlying the different IT systems in the university. This integration has proved to be a critical factor for the success of the online courses.

From an administrative point of view, the e-learning systems work well, although there is currently no certification provided by them. They integrate data pulled from different databases and data sources.

The overall competence in ICT in the institution can be described as not balanced: There are two levels of users in the UNED: firstly, (typically the younger staff) who are able to use most aspects of ICT available (and are keen to learn new techniques and tools as they appear), and secondly, (typically older staff), who have difficulties using services that go beyond simple Web browsing and email.

Courses

The range of e-learning courses offered by the UNED is certainly very wide as they belong to 29 different qualifications in the areas of Humanities,



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Social Sciences, Sciences and Engineering. Coming from a distance education context in which the use of ICT is just another means to enable teaching and learning within a context of physical separation, "onlineability" is not seen as a problematic issue, although the science and engineering subjects have problems with the correct use / presentation of mathematical symbols.

At the moment, the UNED does not offer flexible start-up and progression due to the fact that the online courses use a rigid calendar based on enrolment deadlines, exam timetables, etc.

Asynchrony is the main underlying concept for online communication and collaboration.

Management, strategy and attitudes

The university and its governing team have assumed a clear compromise to incorporate ICT in the model of distance education, to which end, norms have been established regarding the incorporation of e-learning tools into the didactic process.

The institution's virtualization plan that started in the year 2000 with the aim to offer all compulsory courses online followed a mediated bottom-up approach in which teachers that wished to digitalize their courses were offered help by a specially created unit called USO-PC (which forms part of the Center of Technical Innovation and Development; CINDETEC). USO-PC with its team of experts in the use of authoring and multimedia tools provides guidance in the creation of adequate materials for the VLE or in the digitalization of already existing resources. At the same time, the unit is responsible for the administrative management of the VL-platform like enrolment and user management.

The pedagogical framework of the courses that is based on the traditional pedagogical principles - customization (individualization and socialisation), activity, creativity and constructivism - is defined by the University Institute of Distance Education (IUED), an entity that has also been responsible for the edition of the "Guía para la Virtualización de las Enseñanzas Regladas" (Virtualization Guide for Official Education). The USO-PC follows the recommendations of the IUED but it is usually the teacher who finally decides the characteristics of his online course.

Possibly as a result of this institutional support and guidance, the attitude of the lecturers and tutors has been generally positive. Most people recognised the advantages of these systems, but at the same time, noted that their use added to the work load.



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The strategy used in the actual course delivery can be characterized by the intensive promotion of communicative and collaborative activities in the course that are backed by an online tutor who is the main permanent reference for both students and specialized teachers of each course. The tutor is in charge of the correct and punctual development of the activities and deals with particular problems of every single student.

On the content side, each module is moderated by one of the teachers, experts in the field covered by the module. The teachers are in charge of conducting the learning processes in each module. This system reflects a considerable amount of industrialization by separating two different components which are student/teacher support (offered by the tutor) and teaching (offered by the teacher).

The UNED applies variety of quality control models, some of which were generated at an international level. Others were designed at a national level and a third group represent internal proposals of the institution itself. The academic and administrative development and management is in charge of quality control processes based on interviews and questionnaires. Results are closely analyzed by management and the teaching board in order to apply findings in the following editions of the program. In addition to this, a questionnaire to determine the level of satisfaction of all implied parties is handed out every second edition of the Masters course.

There are no explicitly defined quality standards for e-learning. The institution is working with recommendations and protocols focussed on the evaluation of materials and courses. Online teachers receive reports with suggestions based on the results of the mentioned evaluation which is undertaken by the Institute of Distance Education (IUED).

The main pillars of the institution's quality system are the following:

- a) A precise pedagogical framework provided by the IUED
- b) Adequate training for the personnel attending the online courses
- c) Quality control applied by USO-PC (support unit for virtual courses) before publicizing the course
- d) Periodical questionnaires about student's satisfaction

The additional effort made by the teaching staff that deals with online courses has been taken into consideration, and after an initial period of experience, the work load is calculated approximately. It oscillates around 20% of the estimated time available.

The collaboration with other institutions is limited to certain postgraduate courses. The main benefit has been the enrichment of the range of courses that we can offer.

As a public university, the UNED has full credibility with the government and the public administrations of the country.



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The method of dealing with the large number of students is based on a combination between human and technological resources. The UNED has approximately 1300 lecturers and 6400 tutors to attend its students via the online courses. At the same time there are a series of applications that connect to the institution's data bases as part of the online courses.

Economy

The UNED does not have additional income from virtual courses. The virtual courses are offered as one more tool or service among those that are already available through enrolment.

The institution experiences pressure in the meaning of an increasing competition in the e-learning market. More and more universities offer e-learning modules as a complement to their traditional course provision, so that a growing number of providers attend a shrinking market of students. According to contracting models, at the moment the UNED does not consider flexible employment as an option although it may become one in the near future.