Abstract

The European commission adopted the eEurope plan in 2000, which focused on “exploiting the advantages offered by the Internet” for the benefit of all European citizens through the European e-learning program launched in 2001. One of the program’s actions concentrates on European virtual campuses, with the goal of encouraging new organizational models for European universities, including exchanges and sharing based on virtual mobility. Among the many challenges to be met, low faculty involvement and lack of integration of “e-modules” within curricula (aka “unbundling”) pose a major threat to sustainability of cross-institutional virtual campuses. More than 10 years later with the emergence of the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) one can only ponder on the future of those virtual campuses. Based on experience drawn (1) from the League of European Research Universities’ (LERU) network, which regroups 21 leading multi-faculty research universities, and (2) from the University of Geneva, I will address the problems and prospects of e-Learning in this context and highlight potential paths that higher education could [...]
e-Learning in Europe: overshadowed by MOOCs?

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In early 2000s, a plethora of online education initiatives emerged in Europe (and elsewhere as well), for instance:

- The eEurope plan focusing on "exploiting the advantages offered by the Internet" for the benefit of all European citizens, and in particular in education with the action line "European Youth into the Digital Age";
- Several virtual campus projects, e.g., UKeU, e-LERU, the Swiss Virtual Campus, and the Virtual University of Bavaria;
- Websites for open digital publication of high quality educational materials organized as courses, e.g., the Ariadne project (ariadne-eu.org) and the OpenCourseWare (OCW) movement.

Compared to the OCW initiatives and more recently to the Khan academy, which are profitable platforms providing high-quality open-educational materials mainly targeting undergraduate students, one can only ponder on the factors that determine the success or failure of virtual campuses or university consortia dispensing online courses. Is establishing online learning, with the aim of encouraging new organizational academic models for promoting exchanges and sharing of content, such a risky enterprise?

Yet, sustainable online education initiatives exist, as exemplified by:

1. Virtual campuses based on specific themes and using e-learning as an add-on, e.g., the Virtual Campus for a Sustainable Europe, GPIDEA focusing on agriculture and human science, or CIC.net to share courses in rare languages;
2. Online learning relying on blended learning model, e.g., the German Virtual University of Bavaria, the Canadian Virtual University, or the University of Phoenix Online;
3. Enterprises that follow explicit, well-thought-out business models, e.g., open universities.

For the others, sustainability remains a major issue. Based on experiences drawn from two projects involving on the one hand the League of European Research Universities' (LERU) network (which regroups 21 leading multi-faculty research universities), and on the other hand the Swiss Universities (about 20 institutions), several hindering factors impeding smooth operation of virtual campuses have previously been identified and include low faculty involvement and lack of integration of "e-modules" within curricula.

With the emergence on the educational market of the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) all previous efforts to setting up online courses seem overshadowed. Indeed, many direction's boards have unilaterally pushed decisions about participation on MOOCs, lest their institution might miss the ongoing train, while putting aside the rich online education expertise and best practices accumulated so far. While MOOCs have
indeed contributed to place digital education on the agenda, in spite of consequent investments no many changes occurred in term of impact on undergraduate education. Consistent with this observation, a recent Gartner’s survey\(^{ii}\) postulates MOOCs will play a diminishing role in the future of education as they morph into new forms.

Among the potential paths most probably pursued in higher education (in the near future) we find hybrid learning for undergraduate students and full online courses targeting continuing education and graduate students. Pertinence of these choices in term of learning outcomes has been abundantly debated\(^{iii}\). For continuing education there is a long tradition in teaching at a distance while keeping high-quality standard. For blended learning, even if the content quality is guaranteed, there is however still much to improve in term of innovation in pedagogy; for instance, mainly the early adopters are experimenting the flipped classroom. Yet, the question remains open for countries in need of educating massively cohorts of young people. To cope with massive teaching, a whole spectrum of issues needs to be solved: quality insurance, students’ motivation, assessment, tutoring, etc. While the MOOCs initially were designated as promising for offering solutions for massive education, their low completion rates, aggravated by the customers’ profile, consisting for a majority of 25-35 year-old graduated workers, have reduced the applicability of such a prospect.

During my presentation I will retrace the main e-learning milestones during the last decade, then present the barriers to adoption of technology-enhanced education while highlighting the prospects of future paths that higher education could follow in this fast-changing landscape.

