

VISCED

A Transnational Appraisal of
Virtual School and College Provision

Intermediate Report

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Author	Paul Bacsich
Contact name	Paul Bacsich
Organisation	Sero Consulting Ltd
Address	Sheffield Technology Parks Arundel Street Sheffield S1 2NS United Kingdom
Telephone	+44 845 111 4122
Email	paul.bacsich@sero.co.uk
Contributors to document	Partners
Quality Reviewers	Giles Pepler, Sally Reynolds
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Virtual School and College Education for Teenagers and Young Adults

Progress Report

Public Part

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Beneficiary organisation: Lambrakis Foundation

Project coordinator: Paul Bacsich
Project coordinator organisation: Sero Consulting Ltd
Project coordinator telephone number: +44 114 235 2364
Project coordinator email address: paul.bacsich@sero.co.uk

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Executive Summary

1. A *virtual school* is a school where pupils learn mainly at a distance over the internet and any activity in a classroom takes no more than around 15% of study time (1 day per week in a full-time school). The pupils will normally be based at home (and in special cases, in hospital, in the workplace, travelling or in a custodial institution) but in some cases they may be at a 'physical' school – just not the school 'at' which they study.
2. In VISCED we are not interested in schools for pupils of all ages – we focus on the age range 14-21 – in other words from the early teenage years, up to and beyond the age at which compulsory schooling ceases (typically 16 to 18). Pupils in the age range 18-21 – but in some cases from age 16 – are typically studying at an institution called a *college* rather than a school. Thus a virtual college is a college where pupils (in this age range normally called *students*) learn mainly at a distance over the internet.
3. The overarching objective for VISCED is to identify and understand virtual schools across the world, not ignoring the US but focussing mainly on Europe and to some extent on other countries in the world which are often seen as relevant to Europe, such as the more prosperous nations (e.g. the non-European OECD and BRIC nations) and/or those with linguistic, cultural or political links to countries in Europe.
4. By doing this, and studying some virtual schools in great detail, we want to understand the reasons why some countries foster virtual schools, others discourage them and a third group (a large group including many countries in Europe) seem to ignore them.
5. Since we focus on countries not dissimilar to many European countries, we finally aim to provide evidence to ministries and their policy advisors to help them analyse which of their educational challenges are susceptible to partial solution using virtual schools – and in such cases, what type of virtual schools they should encourage and what type of virtual schooling within such schools would be most appropriate.
6. Some of these challenges are universal – such as children in hospital, children looked after by institutions (including custodial ones), travelling children and deprived children. Others may be more specific to the country (poor mathematical or foreign language skills).
7. VISCED is a project in the discipline of **comparative education**. Any such project carrying out comparative education has to *prioritise* and then *tier*. VISCED had to decide which countries were relevant to Europe and within the set of relevant countries decide which countries would be studied thoroughly and which in a quicker way.
8. VISCED has developed a large wiki <http://www.virtualschoolsandcolleges.eu>, produced over 100 **country reports** and also studied over 10 **regions** (coherent collections of countries).
9. All countries in the plan now have interim reports, and for the regions in the plan, only East Asia has as yet not been studied so far – most regions (Hispanic America is a good example) have interim reports on the region and

for several of them (like Hispanic America) also on a few of their key countries. A particular feature has been the series of interim reports on many of the regions near to but outside the EU, including country reports right across North Africa and the Middle East and regional reports on Yugosphere, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In terms of island regions influenced by Europe, both Oceania and Caribbean have interim reports on many of their countries.

10. The current state of our research has identified around 450 **virtual schools and colleges** across the world. Some 260 of these are in the USA. Even outside the US we currently have identified over 100. Of these, 30 are in Canada and 59 are in Europe. Australasia has at least 19. There are relatively few in Africa. Asia almost certainly has more than we have identified but China has not been one of our study countries. There appear to be surprisingly few in Oceania and the Caribbean and indeed across many multi-island nations where they might be expected.
11. **Exemplars:** we have identified 53 *notable* examples worthy of consideration as case studies.
12. VISCED *has* developed:
 - **Taxonomy:** identification and discussion of the best way to classify virtual schools – they can be of various types.
 - **Influence Maps:** Understanding the complex and often secretive ways in which educational activities and policies in one country affect educational policy in another country.
 - **Policies:** Formulation of some draft policies at **EU level** which ministries of education in various countries can consider, including recommendations as to which sorts of virtual teaching is appropriate and what steps need to be taken to train and retrain teachers to teach in virtual schools. A companion report for **England** has also been developed.
 - **Teacher training:** Producing a report on appropriate teacher training for teachers aiming to teach in virtual schools.
 - **Innovative pedagogies:** Identifying which pedagogic approaches work best for virtual schools, via an extensive literature search of case studies.
 - **Critical success factors:** initial ideas on what factors are conducive to success and sustainability of virtual schools.
13. The **International Advisory Committee** has met twice and been an effective sounding board.
14. VISCED practitioners are reflective practitioners and with the support of an evaluator have co-developed a **formative evaluation report**.
15. VISCED has deployed high-level and senior **project management** (two senior people) to help ensure effective quality delivery within the compressed timescales caused by the late start and issues over advance payment.
16. The VISCED partnership is robust and many staff have worked together before.
17. **Future plans** are well developed and have taken account of the progress and some minor slippage in Year 1.

Table of Contents

1. PROJECT OBJECTIVES.....	6
2. PROJECT APPROACH.....	7
3. PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS.....	10
4. PARTNERSHIPS	14
5. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE	16
6. CONTRIBUTION TO EU POLICIES	19
7. THE WIKI	22

1. Project Objectives

In order to understand the project's objectives the reader has first to understand the key definition that drives the VISCED project. It has been a vital part of the project to attain clarity of the key definitions.

A *virtual school* is a school where pupils learn mainly at a distance over the internet and any activity in a classroom takes no more than around 15% of study time (1 day per week in a full-time school). The pupils will normally be based at home (in special cases, in hospital, in the workplace, travelling or in a custodial institution) but in some cases they may be at a 'physical' school – but not the school they are studying 'at'.

In VISCED we are not interested in schools for pupils of all ages – we focus on the age range 14-21 – in other words from the early teenage years, up to and beyond the age at which compulsory schooling ceases (typically 16 to 18). Pupils in the range 18-21 – but in some cases from age 16 – are typically studying at an institution called a *college* rather than a school. Thus a virtual college is a college where pupils (in this age range normally called *students*) learn mainly at a distance over the internet.

We have taken the time to make this definition right at the beginning of our report because *virtual schools are not common in Europe*. In fact our current view is that there are less than 100 across the EU and in many countries there are none, or believed by ministries to be none (not the same thing) – this is particularly the case in countries which prohibit or strongly discourage homeschooling. In contrast, virtual schools are quite common in the US – there are several hundred and some authorities estimate that 10% of school pupils are involved in virtual schooling – often taking some of their classes over the internet (from a virtual school) while taking many of their classes in their host school (a physical school).

For convenience in this report we shall use the phrase *virtual school* to cover the cases where the school is in fact a college. This is a not unreasonable simplification because in Year 1 we focussed mainly on virtual schools (14-18 age range).

The overarching objective for VISCED is to identify and understand virtual schools across the world, not ignoring the US but focussing mainly on Europe and to some extent on other countries in the world which are often seen as relevant to Europe, such as the more prosperous nations (e.g. OECD and BRIC nations) and/or those with linguistic, cultural or political links to countries in Europe. By doing this, and studying some virtual schools in great detail, we want to understand the reasons why some countries foster virtual schools, others discourage them and a third group (a large group including many countries in Europe) seem to ignore them. Since we focus on countries not dissimilar to many European countries, we finally aim to provide evidence to ministries and their policy advisors to help them analyse which of their educational challenges are susceptible of partial solution using virtual schools and in such cases, what type of virtual schools they should encourage and what type of virtual schooling within such schools would be most appropriate.

Some of these challenges are universal – such as children in hospital, children looked after by institutions (including custodial ones), travelling children and deprived children. Others may be more specific to the country (poor mathematical or foreign language skills).

2. Project Approach

European projects have a particular approach to managing the project. In EU-funded projects generally and the Lifelong Learning Programme in particular there is a special vocabulary and even a particular preferred order for the tasks. But for a general readership it is much more useful to explain the project in a different way.

However, we have to begin at an even earlier point. In theoretical terms, VISCED is a project in the domain of *comparative education* – the discipline where researchers look at how an educational situation is dealt with in a variety of countries, and then draw lessons for their country – or in our case, countries. (These countries are often thought to be ‘the EU countries’ but they are more precisely the countries collaborating in the Lifelong Learning Programme – a rather larger set of countries including EU, the EFTA countries, Turkey, and a gradually growing set of countries mostly in and around the former Yugoslavia.)

Comparative education is not an easy discipline – governments of countries can always think of reasons why they are quite unlike other countries, even (or especially) nearby ones. Nevertheless, progress can be made, and various multinational agencies including the EU, OECD and UNESCO carry out much comparative work and quite a lot of it is on education.

These agencies have very large budgets – in contrast, within the Lifelong Learning Programme, project budgets are quite small. Education is a complex topic – it covers all ages, all subjects, many different kinds of providers and many languages (over 200 languages are said to be in daily use in Europe). And there are so many countries! There are nearly 200 members of the United Nations, and somewhat over 200 countries regarded by most others as sovereign states. Adding in colonies, autonomous regions with their own internet codes, and a number of other effectively independent disputed territories, one comes close to 250 entities.

Thus any project carrying out comparative education has to *prioritise* and then *tier*. In other words, VISCED had to decide which countries were relevant to Europe and within the set of relevant countries decide which countries would be studied thoroughly and which in a quicker way.

Before the project started, the team (specifically those who wrote the bid) came up with a list of relevant countries, based on their prior knowledge, and divided them into two tiers: those which would be studied in depth, and others which would be studied as part of a region. The ones to be studied in depth included those with project partners, ones where it was already known that there were virtual schools (such as US and Canada) and others which were seen as particularly relevant to Europe even though there was at the time no evidence whether there were virtual schools in them.

By the end of 2011 over 100 country reports had been produced. It was fortunate for VISCED that a previous LLP project, Re.ViCa, had produced country reports on ICT in higher education for most countries of the world which often contained some general material on the country and on education and ICT within the country, though usually with a strong focus on higher education. These had to be updated and relevant material added on schools, ICT in schools and of course any virtual schools.

Complex though it is, this work is only a third of the research work to be done – though it was about two thirds of the research work done in 2011. The second part of

the research work was to consider the *policy aspects* of the virtual schools found in the first part. This involves several related elements:

1. Identification and discussion of the best way to classify virtual schools – they can be of various types.
2. Understanding the complex and often secretive ways in which educational activities and policies in one country affect educational policy in another country.
3. Formulation of some draft policies which ministries of education in various countries can consider, including recommendations as to which sorts of virtual teaching is appropriate and what steps need to be taken to train and retrain teachers to teach in virtual schools.
4. Doing around 10 detailed case studies of specific virtual schools in Europe with a few outside Europe.
5. Since virtual schools, like virtual universities, do not always last for many years, trying to understand what factors predispose a virtual school to be successful and sustainable.

Much of this work, especially items 4 and 5, is scheduled for 2012. For the other items, interim reports have been produced but will be expanded and revised in 2012.

The third part of the research work is wholly contained in 2012. This is to *pilot* (i.e. try out) some aspects of virtual schooling within schools who are closely associated with two of the project partners (in Athens and Sheffield, so as to get a linguistic and political contrast) and in a third case, is a project partner (Ross Tensta Gymnasium, with a particular multi-ethnic student body). Piloting plans have been formulated and reports will be written in later 2012 after the pilots have been run.

However, the research has to be embedded within a larger framework. The project contains many tasks and a set of ten partners with specialised and complementary skills, which need to be deployed to best advantage. Many reports have to be produced. The project team meets every six months and has a monthly teleconference. Thus project management is a key task.

European projects are expected to publish papers, make presentations at conferences, take part in workshops and undertake a range of other tasks to influence the policy makers and other stakeholders interested in project results. Nowadays these tools include web and web 2.0 technologies. Typically research papers and conference presentations are biased towards the second year of the project but VISCED has an active newsletter, coming out every two months, a Twitter stream and a rapidly growing wiki.

The project is also expected to consider how its intellectual property can be exploited and the activities of the project sustained after the EU funding ceases. This is a particular challenge when (as with VISCED) the project has committed to the widest possible release of its outcomes on the wiki which is accessible to the public. An exploitation strategy has been developed and will be updated throughout the life of the project.

Project staff are expected to reflect on their own practice in a similar way to that which teachers are expected to do. An evaluator has been appointed to consolidate

this *reflective practitioner* output and to foster a deeper reflection, with a view to continuous quality improvement of the project during its funded period.

The above tasks are often all the ones which projects take out. However VISCED has adopted one further approach, adapting it from the earlier project Re.ViCa, and supporting new projects (such as POERUP – <http://poerup.referata.com>) who take it up. This is to have an *International Advisory Committee* of experts from outside the project. The IAC is expected first of all to listen to project outcomes (part of the dissemination role of the project) but also to ponder and discuss the outcomes with a view to improving them (so there is an exploitation and even an evaluation aspect).

3. Project Outcomes & Results

It would be tedious to go through the specific deliverables delivered in 2011 or even summarise all the work packages and tasks. So what we provide is a *thematic description* of the outputs so far.

Country reports

These have been the bulk of the work in 2011. The plan (Deliverable 2.1) of which countries and regions to study was part of the original bid: apart from one swap of countries between partners (Ireland to ATiT from Sero and Kenya to Sero from ATiT, after the kick-off meeting) and clarification of region boundaries, it was remarkably stable. It took some time to develop a viable country report template which drew on Re.ViCa yet took account of VISCED needs, but this was organised before summer 2011. All countries in the plan now have interim reports, and for the regions in the plan, only East Asia has as yet not been studied so far – most regions (Hispanic America is a good example) have interim reports on the region and for several of them (like Hispanic America) there are reports also on a few of their key countries. A particular feature has been the series of interim reports on many of the regions near to but outside the EU, including country reports right across North Africa and the Middle East and regional reports on Yugosphere, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In terms of island regions influenced by Europe, both Oceania and Caribbean have interim reports on many of their island countries. Deliverable 2.2 (around 500 pages!) gives a large sample of country reports.

Exemplars

The interim list of exemplars has been growing on the wiki since summer 2011, some embedded in country reports, with an increasing set also having their own entries on the wiki. All this material and key definitions was consolidated into a Gazetteer (Deliverable 2.3). This has a chapter for each continental region (Europe, Africa, Asia, The Americas, Australasia and 'Islands'). The current state of our research has identified around 450 virtual schools and colleges across the world. Some 260 of these are in the USA. Even outside the US we currently have identified over 100. Of these, 30 are in Canada and 59 are in Europe (4 new ones from Latvia were added recently). Australasia has at least 19. There are relatively few in Africa. Asia almost certainly has more than we have identified but China has not been one of our study countries. There appear to be surprisingly few in Oceania and the Caribbean and indeed across many multi-island nations where they might be expected. We have identified 53 notable examples worthy of consideration as case studies.

In addition to the list, a typology of virtual schools has evolved over the last few months of 2011, and discussed at project meetings and the IAC meetings. Many useful ideas have been contributed, but not all can be instantiated as a typology has to be understandable and feasible to apply. The current thinking is in Deliverable 3.1.

Case studies

As noted above, 53 potential case studies have been identified. Around 10 of these will be selected and the case studies undertaken, to be completed by November 2012.

Piloting

Even though the project is running two months later than in the original plan, the detailed piloting work still has to start at the beginning of January 2012 when the school term starts, to be completed at the end of the Spring Term (June or July depending on the country). Three separate piloting reports will be produced in early September 2012 and integrated into one overall piloting report by October 2012. There is now an overall piloting plan (Deliverable 6.1). This describes the VISCED pilot studies planned in Sweden (Ross Tensta Gymnasium, Stockholm), England (Notre Dame High School and The Sheffield College, both in Sheffield) and Greece, where up to 8-10 schools will be involved. In the case of the Swedish and English pilots, there is a detailed description of the work planned in each institution; in the case of the Greek pilot, there is an outline of the range of possible work in the selected schools.

Policy recommendations – including teacher training and innovative good practice

We decided after the September partner meeting that policy recommendations would have to be dealt with at two levels: the EU level and the national level. In view of the partners involved (covering UK, Finland and Estonia) it was further decided that energy would go into (a) an EU-wide policy recommendation and (b) one detailed national policy document, for England, with documents from Finland and Estonia building on that, but coming along early in 2012. England was chosen not only because Sero was the task leader and the lead author used to work for the Ministry on IT policy for education, but also because England was a feasible case where the new government elected in 2010 has changed some aspects of the former government's approach to school education and to ICT in education (in particular, closing Becta) but has begun to make statements again that ICT was relevant; and also (along with some but not all northern countries) its economy was bad but not catastrophic (catastrophic budget cuts tend to lead either to policy freeze or discontinuous unevidenced change). Deliverable 3.5 considers and proposes an EU policy approach and then a policy approach for England consistent with that.

This deliverable is supported by Deliverable 3.2. This is not an interim deliverable but a final deliverable which aims to document the influence that some countries (and other entities) have on other countries' education policies, as judged by documentary analysis. Partners found it challenging to engage with such analyses and found, surprisingly, that some countries do not have a coherent set of national documentation on ICT for education. The task was not designed to take up a large amount of effort, but some interesting conclusions came out. Altogether 21 influencers were identified in separate influence maps of 11 countries/regions provided by the partnership. On an average, about 5 influencers were highlighted per country/region, Finland demonstrating the widest range with 11 influencers. Interestingly PISA was mentioned 11 times but with relatively low influence whereas the EU and the UK were considered more important despite their less frequent appearances.

EU-wide and national policy also involves aspects of teacher training and, potentially, mandating some specific pedagogic approaches. Deliverable 3.6, an interim report on teacher training, takes a 'Scandinavian' perspective on distance education to provide a framework for thinking about training of teachers for virtual schools. It argues that e-learning and distance learning initiatives have often been too

concerned with technology and technological issues, and suggests that teacher training towards successful distance education offers must focus clearly on *IT pedagogy* and development of skills *different* from those suitable for teaching in class or lecture rooms. The report finally presents suggestions for focus areas for teacher training.

Further development of the project's thinking on pedagogy comes from deliverable 3.4, an interim report on pedagogy, which provides a US-based contrast to the Scandinavian standpoint of Deliverable 3.6. It points out that until European case studies are analysed in the VISCED project (a task for 2012) it is impossible to avoid a strong US influence on the literature – since the US has not only the largest number of virtual schools but also some of the largest and the longest-established and (thus) the best-researched. Among other conclusions it suggests that key components of pedagogy include careful content development, insightful instructional design, appropriate methods for student assessment and user-friendly relevant technology. This leads on neatly to the next topic.

Success Factors

It was never planned that much work would be done on Success Factors in 2011 – but a short report on Potential Success Factors (Deliverable 3.3) was produced in time for a summary to be presented to the International Advisory Committee in late November 2011. In 2012 EFQUEL will add their effort into this work.

Project management, evaluation and exploitation

In addition to the work in the project, the surrounding project management, evaluation and exploitation work produced a number of deliverables.

1. Each project meeting produced a Deliverable (1.1 and 1.2). These are far more than just minutes, containing much additional material – the report on the Boot Camp (Deliverable 1.1) is 18 pages.
2. The International Advisory Committee has had two meetings – in Oeiras (just after the EFQUEL conference) and Berlin (just before Online Educa) and these are minuted (Deliverables 5.2 and 5.3). The International Advisory Committee was selected from a Long List of 111 possible members (Deliverable 5.1). Due to changes in staffing and travel budgets (at ministries, companies and institutions), and the need to have a wider country representation (to ensure deep knowledge especially of EU and near-EU countries) there will be a 'refresh' of the IAC in 2012.
3. The project produced an Exploitation Plan (Deliverable 8.1) in September 2011 and an update to this at the end of the year (Deliverable 8.2).
4. The evaluator produced an Evaluation Plan (Deliverable 9.1) which was previewed at the Boot Camp in February 2011 and a Formative Evaluation Report covering the first year (Deliverable 9.2).

In addition to the Deliverables the Progress Report will also attach the minutes of each monthly tele-meeting and the minutes of the additional project meeting in April 2011.

Dissemination

The dissemination strategy was explained in detail in the workplan for the bid. The Deliverable (7.1) relating to this was finalised in July 2011, which allowed the

inclusion of detailed and up to date Dissemination Audit forms from partners once the project restarted in May 2011. The Project Flyer (7.2) was produced in May 2011 in time for the summer season of conferences. The Project web site (7.3) went live around the same time – but the project wiki was in existence from day 1 of VISCED since it had been inherited from Re.ViCa, although intensive population of the wiki with pages tagged as ‘VISCED’ did not start until May 2011 (the page VISCED was first created on 26 April).

As is typical the Dissemination outputs are multi-part deliverables:

- Project presentations (12) – Deliverable 7.4
- Project publications (several) – Deliverable 7.5
- Newsletters (12) – Deliverable 7.6

There were two project presentations in 2011: a VISCED workshop at the ALT-C conference in Leeds (UK) in September and a VISCED presentation at the CONCEDE conference in Oeiras (Portugal), later that month. That may seem low but it is year 1 of a project which in reality did not start substantial work until May 2011. Work is now under way to ensure larger coverage of 2012 conferences.

The term ‘VISCED’ is unique to the project and up to January 2012 has generated somewhat over 8000 hits. An increasing number of entities are indexed on the web first under their VISCED entry.

The first Newsletter came out in May 2011 and there were altogether 5 in 2011 – leaving a target of 7 in 2012 which the project feels is reasonable.

In addition to the more traditional dissemination routes there is a @VISCED twitter account – also, high-profile tweeters in the project use the hashtag #visced in their day to day posts when relevant. There is also a LinkedIn Group and a project blog. To increase traction among the scholarly and research community, VISCED has set up a number of active groups on the Mendeley shared reference system – see e.g. <http://www.mendeley.com/groups/1075201/virtual-schools-and-colleges/> with 193 papers listed (and there are over 10 other groups linked to VISCED work).

Evaluation

Deliverable 9.2 (20 pages) summarises the views of the evaluator Dr Maggie McPherson on the project after one year. She notes that:

“The quantity and quality of the outputs produced so far have been reasonable although some contributions have been more satisfactory than others. It was useful to get feedback from the IAC that the project approach was producing a useful resource that provided information well beyond that previously available.

Where outputs have not been forthcoming in a timely manner, the project managers have been actively prompting action to try and keep tasks on track.

Despite losing almost six months, partners did not want to ask the Commission for an extension. This meant that a year’s work has to be telescoped into eight months in order to bring the project timescale back on track. Although this has largely been achieved, this has been at a high cost of expensive project management time and resources.

...the project managers feel it should be possible to complete an appropriate successor to Re.ViCa by the end of 2012.”

4. Partnerships

VISCED contains ten partners from seven countries from the four quarters of Europe – west (UK and Belgium), Scandinavia (Denmark, Sweden and Finland), East (Estonia) and South (Greece). The countries cover the range of EU country sizes and eight of the EU languages. Their political systems are different – and fluid. For two (UK and Belgium), education is devolved to semi-autonomous regions; for the others, education is organised centrally.

This allows the project to gain a range of perspectives on educational issues.

The partners come from different parts of the educational and institutional universe. There is one school (Ross Tensta Gymnasium, a secondary school), two universities (Aarhus and Leeds), three research-based SMEs/small foundations (Sero, Lambrakis and ATiT), two national agencies (Estonian IT Foundation and Finnish Information Society Development Agency), and two network organisations (MENON and EFQUEL, both based in Brussels). For MENON, much of the work is devolved to the MENON member SCIENTER, based in Italy, and the EFQUEL work in 2012 will be taken forward by the EFQUEL member KU Leuven, further enriching the institutional coverage.

Staff within the partners comprise teachers, university professors/academics, consultants, and businesspeople – one is a former employee of a Ministry of Education who had a key role for e-learning. Many of the staff have or had school-age children – so for them education is not just a theoretical construct.

Several of the partners have worked closely together in the past – MENON, EFQUEL and Lambrakis in particular. Several are working together on other projects, such as Sero and SCIENTER on POERUP (Policies for OER Uptake).

Perhaps as importantly in these days when jobs are no longer held for life, many of the key individuals in the project have worked together in several organisations:

- Paul Bacsich and Sally Reynolds on Re.ViCa (Virtual Campuses)
- Paul Bacsich with Elsebeth Sorensen since the early days of computer conferencing in the 1980s
- Paul Bacsich and Claudio Dondi since the time of DELTA (Framework 3).

However, a partnership would be impoverished if it were only the partners that were involved in the collaboration. One key component of VISCED is the International Advisory Committee. This is composed of around 25 experts in e-learning and other people who are interested in virtual schools, drawn from industry, university research groups and ministries – mostly from Europe but some from further afield. (The project pays each member a small sum for subsistence and intra-EU travel.)

The International Advisory Committee meets twice per year – in 2011 it met first at the EFQUEL Conference in Oeiras, Portugal in September and then again at Online Educa Berlin in late November. On each occasion members of the project present a selection of current findings to the IAC, who discuss the topics and then make suggestions for improvement and in many cases provide additional information. A substantial number of virtual schools were first proposed by IAC members.

Without detailing all the many inputs made by IAC members we can single out in particular the following for key contributions:

- Susan Patrick, President, INACOL – International Association for K-12 Online Learning – who came to the September meeting all the way from the US
- Cathy Cavanaugh, a noted US researcher on virtual schools
- Professor Morten Paulsen of NKI, a noted researcher on e-learning and leader of the MegaTrends project
- Yves Punie of IPTS
- Bas ten Holter, Executive Director (EMEA), Moodlerooms
- Michelle Selinger of Cisco, whose company commissioned *Learning from the Extremes*, one of the key reports taken as input by the project bid.

There is a final outer circle of collaborators whose main role is collaboration on other projects but who have played a key role prior to VISCED and in many cases during it by collaboration with project partners and staff. We focus on just a few of the many collaborations during 2011 but it should be noted that before VISCED started, Paul Bacsich had been invited to Japan, Brazil and Mexico and visited virtual education providers on these trips.

In the project *Distance Learning Benchmarking Club* and associated benchmarking work with Swedish universities, Paul Bacsich made several trips to Sweden in 2011 to meet with universities in Lund, Stockholm and Gotland and on several occasions discussed issues of virtual schooling and teacher training with university providers. He also visited a Swedish Free School (Donnergymnasiet Gotland) and also one of the Swedish virtual schools, Sofia Distans.

For four years Paul has been making regular trips to Wales to support university-level e-learning and also discusses issues of teacher training and virtual provision with the universities and colleges in Wales. This work continued throughout 2011, for part of which time he was supporting Trinity College Carmarthen – and his work with Glamorgan University (who also run several colleges) and the University of Aberystwyth (active in teacher training) will continue into 2012.

He is likely to be making visits to New Zealand and Turkey in 2012.

Sally Reynolds of ATiT oversees the Media & Learning conference each year in Brussels in November which brings together a wide variety of e-learning experts including several last year interested in virtual schools.

Finally a number of the other projects that Sero, SCIENTER, ATiT and Lambrakis are involved in bring their staff into contact with useful sources of information especially as they relate to Open Educational Resources and their use in schools. There are too many of these to list them in this overall report.

5. Plans for the Future

Following the structure of Section 3, we provide a thematic description of the plans for the future (year 2012).

Country reports

The interim reports on countries and regions will be consolidated, expanded and cross-checked with other information from inside and outside the project. Any gaps in planned coverage will be filled – for example the UK report needs a section on Wales and there are a few country reports in the East Asia region needing attention (e.g. Japan), but they will from now on be done only to the depth required to generate and contextualise exemplars.

The plan is to complete this process by July 2012 – bearing in mind that on a wiki a page is never finally completed. As part of this an *internal* and an *external* quality review will be done on the most important (at least all of the Tier 1) country reports – the internal by peer review (each report being reviewed by someone from a different partner), and the external by members of the International Advisory Committee. In addition, the internal evaluator will review a selection of country reports – and also the more important other deliverables.

Exemplars

The interim list of exemplars will be improved and updated – in 2012 increased attention will be paid to virtual colleges. The plan is to complete this process by October 2012. The project believes that the list of virtual schools (outside the US) is nearly complete – but this belief will be checked for Europe by doing systematic expert searches for relevant virtual institutions (using the correct terms in the local languages) across the continent.

Case studies

There is already a list of proposed case studies and proposals for the structure of the case studies. Around 10 of these will be selected and the case studies undertaken, to be completed by November 2012, but it is hoped that around half can be ready by summer 2012.

Piloting

The main operational activity (as opposed to desk research) is the piloting of virtual schools approach in at least five institutions: Ross Tensta Gymnasium (the Swedish partner), Notre Dame High School and Sheffield College in Sheffield (both under the guidance of Sero) and several innovative schools in Greece (under the guidance of Lambrakis). Even though the project is running two months later than in the original plan, the detailed piloting work still has to start at the beginning of January 2012 when the school term starts, to be completed at the end of the Spring Term (June or July depending on the country). Three separate piloting reports will be produced in early September 2012 and integrated into one overall report by October 2012.

Policy recommendations – including teacher training and innovative good practice

The interim reports on teacher training and innovative good practice will be improved, but it is not expected that the final reports will be much different in conclusions.

The main attention will go into the policy recommendations where the interim report looked at just a few countries out of the ones to be considered.

These reports will be completed to draft final level by November 2012, so that summaries of them can be presented at Media & Learning and at Online Educa including to the International Advisory Committee for final moderation, allowing them to be completed by the end of the project (December 2012).

Success Factors

It was never planned that much work would be done on Success Factors in 2011 – but a short report on Potential Success Factors was produced in time for a summary be presented to the International Advisory Committee in late November 2011. In 2012 EFQUEL will add their effort into this work – via their member KU Leuven (who assisted the similar work in Re.ViCa). A scoping document will be produced by March 2012, an interim version by July 2012 and a draft final version just in time for the November IAC (just as for the policy paper). Due to changes in thinking in the benchmarking world, including the influence of US thinking on such matters, the approach being taken will develop a scheme for virtual schools integrated with the existing Re.ViCa scheme for virtual universities and colleges. This could save a certain amount of development cost, which will be very helpful since some other task budgets are under-resourced.

Virtual schools event and the International Advisory Committee

The next partner meeting is planned for May 2012 in Sheffield and it is planned that the International Advisory Committee will meet around the same time, also in Sheffield. The focus of this IAC will be success factors and piloting in virtual schools; however, since there is a lack of virtual school *practitioners* on the IAC the IAC members will be extended to include a number of these from the 50 or more ongoing virtual schools in Europe and they will be invited to attend the meeting in Sheffield.

Depending on the level of commitment from the relevant English Ministry and other key players, this meeting may be extended to a mini-conference which a wider number of delegates (up to 75) would attend. The go/no-go decision date for this mini-conference is the end of January so at the time of writing this report we cannot say whether the mini-conference will go ahead. But there will certainly be a project meeting linked to a meeting of an extended IAC and some expert presentations.

After that event, the International Advisory Committee will meet finally the day before Online Educa Berlin. Its main task then is to comment on the Policy Recommendations and the Critical Success Factors scheme. To support this process a wider range of policy experts and ministry officials from across Europe will be invited to attend.

Project management, evaluation and exploitation

In addition to the work in the project the surrounding project management, evaluation and exploitation work continues.

1. There will be two further project meetings – at Sheffield in May 2012 and somewhere central, probably Brussels, in October/November 2012. The challenge with the final project meeting in a project is to have it late enough that most work has been done, yet early enough that there is still time to affect the reporting of the work – thus it needs to take place by mid November.

2. Tele-meetings will continue monthly, but with a gap in August.
3. As before the evaluator will attend each face to face project meeting and each IAC. In addition, she will focus more on evaluating *outputs* of the project, not only the processes. Project staff will be strongly encouraged, more so than in 2011, to reflect on their own practice and report on it.
4. The final project meeting will discuss the post-project exploitation plan, including sustainability of the wiki for an indefinite period, and the newsletter for at least an interim period.

Dissemination

The VISCED project is now beginning to deliver *results* – not only the country reports and lists of exemplars but also some outputs of literature searches and policy analyses. An early activity in 2012 – already in progress – is to identify the key conferences in 2012 and the deadline for paper submission, in order to plan who, from which partner, goes to each key event to present aspects of VISCED. Obviously EDEN, ALT-C, Media & Learning and Online Educa are key events. (Some of the other major international events such as Ed-Media are not in Europe in 2012.) In addition there are many national conferences and several have already been identified, e.g. in Sweden, Finland and UK.

In line with the VISCED Dissemination Plan we want partners to combine the dissemination activity or conference presentation with partner meetings, IAC Meetings or other events so that VISCED only needs to pay the conference fee for the dissemination activity and thus get best value for its grant expenditure.

The newsletter will continue, on a bi-monthly basis, but with three issues in consecutive months in early 2012, in order to ensure that the full total of 12 (identified in the work plan) are produced. So far the contributions have been mainly from a minority of the partners – we shall make strenuous efforts to ensure a more balanced set of contributions in 2012.

The Handbook is envisaged as a 200-page report. A likely chapter breakdown and sense of scale can be gained by reading the existing deliverables which already cover:

1. Typology (D.3.1.)
2. List of Exemplars (D.2.3) in the context of Country Reports (D.2.2)
3. Policy Recommendations (D.3.5)
4. Innovative Good Practice (D.3.4)
5. Teacher Training (D.3.6)

To this will be added new chapters on:

- Case Studies
- Piloting
- Success Factors (based on a considerable expansion of D.3.3).

6. Contribution to EU policies

In the university world, Europe has for some years been working towards a European Higher Education Area, based on the Bologna Declaration (updated at Bergen and Lisbon). The work of Re.ViCa on virtual universities showed that there was a degree of *global* consensus on higher education and appropriate governance of institutions – and even the beginnings of a global approach to quality in universities. There is also a thriving international market in higher education with millions of students across the world studying outside their home country – and hundreds of thousands studying at a distance from a provider not based in the country in which they live.

In schools education this is almost completely absent, except for provision for some expatriate children. Furthermore, the locus of control of schools is nearer to the school – it sounds good that it is more devolved than is typically the case for universities, but this can lead to a lack of policy coherence. Finally, unlike in the university sector in many countries (even now in Europe) there is little private sector provision and even less integration of that provision in policy terms. Ministries are often unaware – or unwilling to become aware – of the private sector in schools. (This might raise issues with some international survey results of the schools sector, since including or excluding the private sector in some countries could make a difference to the results.) In some countries there is a suspicion that the private schools sector prefers it this way – indeed, when working on an international schools survey a few years ago one of our colleagues found that it was impossible in some countries to get a list of private schools, even from the association of private schools! And this issue is replicated to this day – in at least two European countries the virtual schools exist in legal limbo, yet are funded by the state for certain kinds of teaching.

The college level is in-between – some aspects in some countries are aligned with Bologna, most are not. (This situation is completely different from the community college system in the US, which is closely integrated with the university sector.) The college level also suffers from there being no consensus as to what a college is – not only is the boundary between post-secondary non-university and post-secondary university education unclear, and articulated differently in different countries, but the lower boundary is also not clear. In at least one EU country there are pupils doing the same courses, some at colleges, some at schools, funded by different ministries at different rates. Finally, the college sector suffers from a lack of attention from senior policy levels – most children of the elite do not go to colleges – and when the policy makers do focus on colleges, they tend to impose dirigiste solutions.

EU policies

Deliverable 3.5 discusses EU-level policy issues related to virtual schools and makes several key recommendations. Among its top-level recommendations are:

1. With oversight and co-ordination from the Commission, individual countries' Education Departments should review the interface between the virtual schools' and colleges modes of operation and their own existing regulatory frameworks to ensure that where virtual schools and colleges help the nation achieve its educational, economic and social goals there are no unnecessary bureaucratic impediments which might inhibit their development and sustainability. Virtual schools and colleges should be subject to the same degree of oversight as physical schools and receive the same level of support.

2. The Commission should review *its own* frameworks, policies, and procedures to ensure that where virtual schools and colleges contribute to the achievement of its educational, economic and social goals there are no unnecessary bureaucratic impediments.
3. The Commission and individual Education Departments should consider how they might bring virtual schools and colleges within a regulatory and accountability framework which protects but does not disadvantage learners – or the schools. This need not be overly bureaucratic but should simply ensure equivalence with the accountability frameworks which underpin ‘traditional’ or ‘physical’ schools.
4. There is a need for clarity with regards to the ‘ownership’ of qualifications achieved by students who have a physical host-school but who undertake supplementary studies at a virtual institution. The first ‘owner’ of any qualification is the student. However, virtual schools often struggle to justify their value and their funding because they are not counted in ‘official’ censuses of qualifications. Equally, host schools have been known to claim credit for qualifications achieved by their students at these ‘invisible’ virtual schools. VISCED already has evidence of several thousand European students studying online across borders (outside of their home country). The Commission and individual Education Departments should clarify their positions in order to preserve the integrity of qualifications data
5. Individual Education Departments should review, and consider revising, current school inspection/assessment paradigms – specifically to consider the development and recognition/adoption of Success Metrics for virtual schools and colleges. Some basic criteria should be applied as to legality and governance, funding and sustainability, validity of qualifications, equality of student access and experience and, of course, the quality of the teaching and learning.

In addition, there are within the Lifelong Learning Programme a number of policy statements derived from general considerations. It is these that we first consider, focussing on those which relate to educational policies, not policies within the Lifelong Learning Programme.

Lifelong Learning Programme

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To contribute to increased participation in lifelong learning by people of all ages, including those with special needs and disadvantaged groups, regardless of their socio-economic background; and Identifying and implementing innovative uses of ICT for lifelong learning, in particular for groups at risk of exclusion

VISCED aims to foster a wider range of institution-based and non-institution-based ICT-facilitated provision for teenage children and young adults (14-21), including supplementary provision (specialist subjects, additional support for certain sections of the population etc) to what their local provider supplies. The use of ICT also allows participation in school-level education by those who cannot easily attend conventional institutions due to disability, hospital residence, custody, or

homeschooling issues. We have found virtual schools for such constituencies in a few European countries – yet in adjacent and similar countries no such provision exists – or if it does, it is not visible. This raises some challenging issues.

To support the development of innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies and practice for lifelong learning and To support the development of innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies and practice for lifelong learning and ICT as a catalyst for innovation and creativity in lifelong learning

VISCED has carried out a systematic search on virtual school pedagogy, with a degree of focus on the United States where virtual schools are far more highly developed than in any other country, even adjacent Canada. Only in the US are there (so far, until VISCED completes) multiple systematic, researched case studies and evaluations of virtual schools. This provides a wealth of material that can be adapted for use in European schools – *and not only in virtual schools.*

Making provision for learners with special needs, and in particular by helping to promote their integration into mainstream education and training

VISCED's focus on virtual education facilitates the development of techniques, based more on asynchronous textual interaction and less on synchronous visual interaction, to support the integration of learners with special needs into mainstream education. Such learners can be much less easily stigmatised as 'special need' when they give few visual or auditory clues; moreover, the use of text readers, spell checkers and assistive interfaces further facilitate their ability to learn and collaborate

Promoting an awareness of the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity within Europe, as well as of the need to combat racism, prejudice and xenophobia

The sheer scale and documentation of the VISCED input from the diverse world (going far beyond the usual range of high-income countries, Western and Eastern, focussed on by most other analysts such as at OECD) will be of particular value in challenging European and national stereotypes and demonstrating that all populated continents and many countries contain innovators in education.

In addition, the largest pilot has been selected to be in a highly diverse school population: at Ross Tensta Gymnasium in Stockholm which has over 20 nationalities among its pupils.

National policies

There is one further problem of recent origin. Since the recession, many European countries, some with much publicity, others more discreetly, have been cutting their educational budgets, not only in schools, but in ministries (fewer civil servants), in the agencies that ministries used to rely on for advice, and in terms of the number and scale of projects contracted to university research teams to study specific aspects of schooling. The closure of Becta in the UK was just the tip of the iceberg. In more than one country head teachers regularly say "Where on earth did that idea come from!?"

Thus those of our colleagues tasked with writing policy papers in VISCED have a much more challenging task than they would have had a few years ago.

However, the section in Deliverable 3.5 on national policy for England shows, we hope, that there is still scope in these challenging times for within-nation policy development taking account of the EU context.

7. The wiki

The wiki – <http://www.virtualschoolsandcolleges.eu> – is such a central component of the VISCED project that it deserves its own section.

First set up in November 2007 at KU Leuven to support the Re.ViCa project (Review of Virtual Campuses), the wiki has been under constant development since then, even though Re.ViCa ended in October 2009 and VISCED did not start until January 2011. It is one of the largest educational wikis in existence and certainly the largest with professionally-written peer-reviewed material. The Main Page was created on 7 November 2007 and has been viewed over 135,000 times – and updated over 150 times since then. These figures underestimate the traffic because increasingly, since VISCED started, traffic is directed from outside the wiki *directly* to pages – such as directly to the page on virtual schools, viewed over 3000 times, or to country pages, where a popular and established page like that on Australia has been viewed over 20,000 times and updated over 300 times.

The wiki has been used for VISCED since early 2011. After the end of the funded period of Re.ViCa in October 2009, the partners agreed to continue it for at least two years. Additional material was included originating from material created to support projects at Becta, the UK Open University, scholarly and research papers including on the UK e-University archives, benchmarking and quality, and as a vehicle to provide project work for interns – regarding the last, many of the entries on countries in Africa were developed during early 2011 by Graham Clarke, an intern at Sero, building on earlier work in 2010 by volunteer professional staff who felt that African education was often under-represented on internet databases.

The VISCED partners have committed to host the wiki for at least three years after the end of the funded period of Re.ViCa. Already the POERUP project (funded under KA3 ICT from November 2011) is drawing on material from the VISCED wiki and considering how best to store its new material on the wiki in the longer term. (POERUP runs until mid 2014.) It was decided by POERUP in consultation with VISCED that any large-scale transfer of material from POERUP to the VISCED wiki would not occur until after the VISCED project had completed – this best preserves the branding of VISCED as the current lead developer of content on the wiki. (However, some small-scale additions are being made by POERUP where this can be done in a way synergistic with but not disruptive to the development of VISCED content – see in particular the entries on OER-related topics (in particular <http://virtualcampuses.eu/index.php/Category:POERUP>).

In order to provide an ongoing and sustainable feel to the wiki, the specific project management for VISCED is stored on another wiki – http://visced.referata.com/wiki/Main_Page. This avoids the situation that pertained at the end of the Re.ViCa project when a great deal of project management and administrative material had to be removed. (POERUP has a similar approach.)

In fact the *pop-up wiki* approach has now been used by Sero (the Coordinator) and some other organisations as a routine tool in project management and information dissemination (see for example <http://luoerl.referata.com/wiki/LUOERL>), with its links to Mendeley.

There are many lessons to be learned on how best to use and edit on wikis. Staff on the VISCED project who are new to wikis are still improving their skills. The software for the wiki was updated recently which makes it rather easier to use and manage – and the support in Microsoft Word and some open source tools for “Save to wiki” is increasingly helpful to editors,

Wikististics

In total, between 1 May 2011 and 31 December 2011, 3048 unique visitors visited the website 4512 times and viewed the web pages a total of 12301 times (of which 8579 are Unique Pageviews).

The visible peaks are at the end of almost each month (except August 2011) which correlates with the newsletter publication dates. The peaks are sometimes spread across two days or even delayed when the newsletter is published on a Friday, since some readers only see the e-mail notification on Monday (an effect which is very visible after the July and September 2011 issue).

When looking at the countries visitors are based in when visiting the VISCED project website, it is clear that we have interested visitors across the world – the top ten countries being United Kingdom, Belgium, United States, Estonia, Portugal, Finland, India, Australia, France, and then Spain. Looking at subcontinental regions, the ranking is Northern Europe, Western Europe, Northern America, Southern Europe, Southern Asia, Australia and New Zealand, Eastern Europe, South-Eastern Asia, Western Asia, then South America.

When it comes to the wiki, the pattern is more complex because VISCED shares the wiki with Re.ViCa and some smaller projects. However, some initial tabulation shows the following:

Page statistics	
Content pages	2,624
Pages (All pages in the wiki, including talk pages, redirects, etc.)	7,924
Uploaded files	491
Edit statistics	
Page edits since the wiki was set up	31,415
Average edits per page	3.96
User statistics	
Registered users	270
View statistics	
Views total (Views to non-existing pages and special pages are not included)	3,197,746
Most viewed pages	
Category:VISCED	186,256
Main Page	147,661
Programmes	55,023
Abbreviations	43,915
Category:Universities	31,097
Category:United States	29,895
Category:Abbreviations	24,803
Virtual campus	23,167
Australia	20,572
Resources	17,215

