International Advisory Committee – Report of Second Meeting

VISCED
A Transnational Appraisal of
Virtual School and College Provision

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Education and Culture DG
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Table of Contents

1 Attendance 3

1.1 IAC members attending: 3

1.2 Project partners attending: 3

2 Introduction to meeting objectives and plenary discussion 4

2.1 Introduction 4

2.2 Comments from plenary discussion 4

3 Country reports on the wiki and plenary discussion 5

3.1 Introduction 5

3.2 Comments from plenary discussion 5

4 Emerging success factors 5

4.1 First draft 5

4.2 Comments from plenary discussion 5

5 Taxonomy 7

6 Case studies 9

6.1 Introduction 9

6.2 Comments from plenary discussion 9

7 Policy recommendations 9

7.1 Introduction 9

7.2 Comments from plenary discussion 9

8 Conclusion and next meeting 10

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International Advisory Committee

Minutes of second meeting

Date: 30 November 2011 Location: Hotel Palace, Berlin

1 Attendance

1.1 IAC members attending:

Name	***Organisation***	***Country***
Deborah Arnold	Vidéoscop, Université Nancy 2	France
Cathy Cavanaugh	University of Florida at Gainesville	USA
Bas Ten Holter	Moodlerooms Inc.	Belgium
Barbara Hubert	Thompson Rivers University	Canada
Lauren Jensen	Thompson Rivers University	Canada
Jouni Kangasniemi	Ministry of Education and Culture	Finland
Helle Mathiasen	Aarhus University	Denmark
Dr Albert Sangrà Morer	Universtat Oberta de Catalunya	Spain
Michelle Selinger	Director of Education, Cisco	USA

1.2 Project partners attending:

Name	***Organisation***	***Country***	***Attendance***
Nikitas Kastis	Lambrakis Research Foundation	Greece	PM
Nikos Zygouritsas	Lambrakis Research Foundation	Greece	All day
Barry Phillips [minutes]	Sero Consulting Ltd	UK	All day
Sally Reynolds [host]	ATiT	Belgium	All day
Claudio Dondi	MENON	Belgium	PM

2 Introduction to meeting objectives and plenary discussion

2.1 Introduction

Sally Reynolds gave the IAC an explanation of the VISCED project and described the role of the IAC and the specific objectives of this meeting.

Barry Phillips gave an overview of the current state of research focusing on Europe. It was explained that for Europe a very flexible definition of Virtual Schools had been used with the intention of building an inventory and understanding the spectrum of models within Europe. It was acknowledged within VISCED that the current list would include some initiatives which would not meet the more tightly defined description of Virtual Schools and, as such, would be re-categorised or removed. Barry Phillips listed some initial meta-level observations:

- There is quite a broad spectrum across the 40+ schools but compared with e.g. the US in Europe there tends to be more focus on 'inclusion' issues (although these too are varied);
- There appears to be little or no enthusiasm at a strategic level (e.g. national or regional Governments) for Virtual Schools although they do support individual institutions;
- We have found very few Virtual Schools in Eastern Europe or amongst former Soviet nations generally.

2.2 Comments from plenary discussion

- A lot of schools, both virtual and traditional, would like to share and collaborate more but are hindered from doing this by infrastructure or security (firewall) issues;
- Exams and accreditation are barriers to virtual schooling;
- Some organisations may be providing Virtual Schooling but not defining it as such;
- Most countries in Europe have 'inclusion' strategies – it is surprising that there are not more Virtual Schools generally or that one country has not yet pursued a Virtual School strategy;
- There is quite lot of activity in Turkey (this will be followed up with **Cathy Cavanaugh**);
- **Matthew James** (formerly with the English National College for School Leadership) from the International Baccalaureate would be a useful IAC member (to follow up with **Michelle Selinger**) since he is looking at distance learning;
- We should not forget the influence of tradition as an explanation for so few Virtual Schools – the main objective of Governments in Europe for a long time was to keep children safe and off the streets (especially in Southern European countries);
- Another barrier is that Governments/agencies (industry?) have invested millions of €€ and ££ in ICT **in the classroom** and are reluctant to see this become obsolete – this holds back innovation;
- Look for the IOC (Open Institute of Catalonia) which has thousands of students aged 12-18 years;
- We have not listed 'necessity' as a driving factor/motivation (i.e. for learners where there is no other way of accessing education);
- We have not listed the power of IT as good for learning as a driver;
- In the USA there is a differentiation between 'awarding institutions' (schools) and 'course providers' (e.g. commercial sector online content providers) – this is a taxonomic feature which needs addressing;
- Pricing was a driving factor in the growth of the Virtual Universities in the US (because prices are so high) – with the growth of Virtual Schools in the US does this mean the cultural/traditional issues of childminding, socialisation etc do not exist there the same way they do in Europe?
- Pearsons are delivering 2 virtual degree courses.

3 Country reports on the wiki and plenary discussion

3.1 Introduction

Sally Reynolds led the IAC on a walk-through of the wiki and showed the country descriptions.

Barry Phillips tabled the definitions being used.

3.2 Comments from plenary discussion

- Additional schools and colleges were suggested for Spain, France, Canada, Scotland and suggested follow up for the US, Finland, Denmark, Australia (Connected Classrooms) Sri Lanka, Nepal and UAE;
- Devoirs.fr is not a Virtual School;
- In France there are numerous virtual vocational colleges and courses;
- The 'new' Finland Virtual School is a Swedish-speaking one;
- **Cathy Cavanaugh** suggested an additional US policy paper to follow up;
- The Finland Ministry of Education recently sued a Virtual School provider for return of funding after it had enrolled students from outside of its geographical mandate – a judgement is due later this year;
- There has been a change of administration in Denmark and a restructuring of Ministries – there is now no Ministry of Education – to a Ministry of Child and Teaching and a Ministry of Education and Innovation;
- There may be some additional categories of learner e.g. in the Netherlands there are children of diplomats, Roma, children of Rhine river-shipping communities and in the US there are schools for Jewish groups, Gay and Lesbian groups (note, the Jewish model could go global).

4 Emerging success factors

4.1 First draft

Sally Reynolds showed the group the Re.ViCa Key Success Factors and invited the plenary to work through these and comment on their appropriateness for Virtual Schools.

4.2 Comments from plenary discussion

A wide range of points were made in discussion, based on examination of Re.ViCa Key Success Factors in the wiki. The first two points [highlighted in bold type] were considered particularly important by the IAC group:

- **The degree of innovation – the regular reviewing and updating of both technologies and pedagogies;**
- **The relevance of tools and activities to the specific learning environments of the target audience;**

- Developing and maintaining an explicit and shared set of goals and objectives;
- The level of collaboration: amongst teachers, inter-organisation or amongst pupils?
- The existence of appropriate pedagogical models in line with goals and mission: a clear eLearning strategy with goals and a clear approach to delivery;

- The degrees of individualization and personalization;
- The instructional design approach;
- The extent to which schools respond to particular societal demands or problems, e.g. school phobics, marginalized groups, etc;
- The degree to which the Virtual School meets policy imperatives in a country;
- The extent to which the school fits the regulatory framework of the country;
- Teacher motivation and incentives;
- The connection of the Virtual School to the notion of excellence, with roles recognized and respected;
- Teachers need not just to be enthusiastic about e-learning but also about their subject;
- Teacher preparation and development and appropriate to the model;
- In many schools (particularly in the US) teachers are not expected to create content – Success Factors will vary depending on whether teacher-created courses is part of the model or not;
- The degree to which cost matches resources available and is appropriate to funding models;
- Overall cost-effectiveness;
- The degree to which the Virtual School can find champions and can leverage public opinion and public support;
- The extent to which the assessment models meet the goals of the specific Virtual School;
- The success or otherwise of a Virtual School has much to do with the degree to which it meets the needs of individual students;
- The usability and ease of use of the technologies in place;
- Technical support for teaching staff;
- Leadership;
- The security of environment and the existence of clear ethical policies;
- The data strategy – what is in place to support prediction, reporting and analysis? (Data includes both scoring and examination information and also patterns of technology usage and learning styles);
- Student support and student satisfaction;
- Transition and permeability: transferability, articulation across sectors, levels and learning contexts;
- Scalability – and the degree to which this matches the objectives;
- Monitoring and evaluation processes with effective quality assurance;
- Flexibility of assessment – and differentiated between individual, self-paced and structured, group learning;
- Advocacy – to push-back negative perceptions (different to 'Selling' or 'Marketing').

The IAC made a number of general comments about this process:

- Success depends on Motivation/Access/Knowledge and Skills – if any of these is missing then success is impossible;
- Consider sub-factors dependent upon the group of learners targeted by the Virtual School, i.e. success factors for a Bednet type of target group will be different than those for an iScoil type of target group;
- Virtual Schools have been successful where 'there is something to be solved and these schools have solved it' and can demonstrate this to society;
- We need to agree what we mean by success – and also agree on the extent to which sustainability is important to this discussion;
- Sustainability is connected to the quality of the Virtual School but notions of scale also have an impact: a school can be successful but may not be sustainable;

- The importance of a glossary where readers and researchers can check for common understanding of terms;
- We should consider constructing models to take in account:
    - Aspects to do with the school and how it operates;
    - Aspects to do with state and national policy.
- Could we develop a diagrammatic representation - 'A systemic model of a school that operates successfully' which would show interdependencies?
- This list of Success Factors could be used to educate people as to the range (and potential) of Virtual Schools.

5 Taxonomy

The meeting did not have sufficient time to discuss the entire document *Typology of Virtual School and College Services* supplied by **Paul Bacsich,** although mapped against the discussion there are very few (if any) major discrepancies. The IAC discussion was based on Paul's conclusions (below):

Virtual schools

The main dimensions along which virtual schools should be tagged are:

- Geography especially continent, country and region;
- Catchment area (international, national, state, school district etc);
- Full-time or supplementary;
- Ownership and flow of funds (state, foundation, company etc);
- Size band.

It is also useful to tag for:

- Technology used;
- Owning company/organisation;

Virtual colleges

The taxonomy follows Re.ViCa with a more nuanced taxonomy for regions as well as countries and a tag to mark whether "virtual college" is the core business of the institution.

There was a general agreement that tagging *everything* which may be of use to *everyone* was a thankless task and one which *may* ultimately be an impediment to those using the wiki. The 'main dimensions' listed above were not disputed. As such, the following is the full list of potential, additional dimensions for which there was also general agreement that the information would be of value. Some (such as Technology used) were simply an attempt for the group to clarify what the 'tags' might look like.

This list is also useful as a cross-check with the suggested list of Case Study questions which we did not have time to discuss in depth. The 'tags' are areas identified by the IAC members as being of key interest (hence their suggestion that these be explicitly identified).

Category	Tag	Tag	Tag	Tag	Tag	Tag	Tag	Tag	Tag
Location of student	Home	Host-school	Hospital	Prison	Virtual School (physical campus)	Community centre/ library	Between schools	Workplace	Mobile
Method of assessment	Physical/face-to-face	Virtual	Continuous/ alternative						
Target audience (1)	School-phobic	Excluded/at risk of exclusion	Distant/rural	Sick	Travelling	Curriculum gaps/niche	Migrant/ host language needs	Credit recovery	Revision/ acceleration
Target audience (2)	Transition/Uni-prep	Dual enrolment	Special curriculum groups (religion, sexual orientation)	Offenders	Common language/cultural needs/connections e.g. French speaking in Belgium				
Governance /Ownership	Public (State)	Private	Public-Private	For profit	Not for profit				
Student funding	Public	Private	Public-Private	Employer					
Modes (nature of cognitive processes)	Synchronous	Asynchronous	Synchronous/ Asynchronous	Blended					
Technology used	Web conferencing suite	Video conferencing	Mobiles	Virtual Worlds					

There was also a desire amongst several members of the IAC for some identification of the 'pedagogical paradigms' e.g. the blend, the typology, learner-centric.

There was also consideration as to whether to should add 'Open' to Full-time and Supplementary in cases where it was not known when students are studying because it is 'open', although some members felt this was included by implication under Supplementary.

6 Case studies

6.1 Introduction

Barry Phillips described the Case Study approach and explained 'what makes these interesting' i.e. that they illustrate a broad spectrum of models, cohorts and drivers and that they are 'of value'. He also introduced the interim 'long-list' of Case Studies from which the final 10 will be selected.

6.2 Comments from plenary discussion

- VISCED should look at the updated list of Success Factors and cross-reference this with the Case Study list to see which success factors are not represented. The IAC should then be canvassed via e-mail for suggestions which might 'fill the gaps';
- Once a Case Study has been completed and categorised VISCED should create and publish a list of institutions which have similar characteristics or may be of interest to anyone looking at this initial Case Study;
- IAC members noted there was no Case Study with a specific focus on 'accelerated learning' but **Cathy Cavanaugh** suggested she could supply one from the USA.

7 Policy recommendations

7.1 Introduction

Claudio Dondi led the group in a broad 'high-level' discussion around Policy Recommendations:

- Most of the schools we see emerging in Europe are doing so outside of the 'official (Government) administration' of education – we should ask the question whether this is good or whether they should be integrated into the 'official administration';
- Is Virtual Schooling a growing phenomenon or is it now one which is stable and for which there is little or no room for growth?
- Do we expect to see, and would it be desirable to see, more or less diversification?

7.2 Comments from plenary discussion

- Virtual Schools could give students the 'space' for learning they so lack at the moment – the space to follow the things in which they are most interested;
- Virtual Schools could be targeted at helping disadvantaged learners or those who have not fully achieved their potential to gain the skills, knowledge and qualifications which would allow them to enter Higher Education – when they would otherwise have little chance. This would meet current economic and skills imperatives. Parents might be targeted to encourage their children to enrol;
- If VISCED can identify (from the current list of Virtual Schools) *why* schools have started-up in each country we would have a very valuable resource for policymakers;

- Erik Duval has stated that students could achieve within 2 years what they currently achieve in 5 years if they could be immersed in their learning – Virtual Schools offer the potential to address this;
- If Europe is to compete with China, South Korea, Singapore etc we need to introduce radical, immersive, personalized, assessment-based learning with better learning outcomes (better planned, better environments and technology etc);
- Students have independent access to huge amounts of knowledge today – the teacher is no longer the gatekeeper and Virtual Schools present an opportunity to harness this within our education systems;
- Assessment of prior learning is a crucial factor if students are to be successful 'independent learners';
- Students have access to open information, open courses, social learning networks etc and now the Badge Movement is growing so they can gain accreditation – if schools are no longer relevant to students they will chose to learn elsewhere (if at all);
- There are very few education goals which cannot be enhanced by some blending of virtual learning;
- What we are seeing now is that very few schools are fully virtual or fully face-to-face – there is still a lot of experimentation happening but it is impossible to ignore;
- The growth is not in terms of Virtual Schools but rather in terms of 'rethinking the blend of time and place';
- The 'big system of education' is evolving but with a few exceptions it is not performing as we would wish and we are all calling for a number of transformations. In order to see innovation should we
  a) try to embed the 'innovative islands' into the mainstream or
  b) allow the 'innovative islands' to be bright examples which we show to the other schools even where they might not yet have the right conditions to achieve change?
- Is virtual schooling a development that can be used to stimulate innovation at a system level?
- We need to consider some practical points about Virtual Learning:
  a) is it legal?
  b) does it produce formal qualifications or informal learning that can be used in formal education?
  c) is it something that Government finances? If so Government will have a say in what is delivered
  d) quality – is Virtual Learning providing what it says it will provide? Is it teaching for the future?
  e) equality – do we guarantee that everyone has access to a minimum level?
- We should develop some radical Virtual Schools to test the model but we cannot experiment with children's lives so we should develop a framework within which this could work;
- VISCED should consider looking at Charles Leadbeater's Learning From The Extremes and using his categorisation (Improve, Reinvent, Supplement, Transformational Innovation http://www.charlesleadbeater.net/cms/xstandard/LearningfromExtremes_WhitePaper.pdf);
- Denmark now has a policy of 100% of all young people having a High-School or Vocational Education Training qualification (a diploma).

8 Conclusion and next meeting

Sally Reynolds thanked members for their valuable contributions and informed them that the third meeting of the IAC would be held in Sheffield, UK on 22nd or 23rd May 2012 – members would be advised of the specific date, time and location in February 2012.