

The Game Changers in Online Learning Series

Case Study # 3:

The Open University of Catalonia

Fully Online. Multi-lingual.

Innovation-focused. Accredited.

Twelve key features of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) which, taken together, are game changing:

- Fully online since its inception in 1996; all programs will be available through mobile devices within two years
- Full range of programs (undergraduate, masters, Ph.D.s, non-credit) all fully online
- Online course design based on a strong [pedagogical model](#)
- Consistent model of online course development and delivery across the university
- Teaching done mainly by 3,500 professors (counsellors) from traditional universities working for UOC on a part-time basis
- All courses offered in Catalan and Spanish (Castellano); some graduate programs also in English
- Virtual Campus designed in-house to support both fully online teaching and administration
- Unique public-private financial model. Annual operating budget: 100 million euros
- Locally and nationally accredited
- 60,000 enrollments, which have doubled over the last seven years; 35,000 graduates to date; many international students (mainly from Latin America)
- Strategic approach to innovation through an online learning research centre, and an academic innovation division
- All academic research focused on the information society

Established in 1996 by the regional government of Catalonia, Spain, [Universitat Oberta de Catalunya](#) (UOC) is a nationally accredited university offering fully online programs in three languages.

Students

In the fall of 2012, 60,876 students were enrolled in UOC, of which 46,612 students were in official degree programs. Enrollments have more than doubled over the last seven years. Enrollments increased by 7% this year, compared with static or declining enrollments in traditional universities in Spain. Most students are working professionals, over 25, but in the last two years the proportion of 20-24 year olds has been increasing slightly. Access to undergraduate programs is mainly open (there are some language and literacy requirements). Unusually for a distance teaching institution, there is a slight majority of male students (52%).

The proportion of international students varies by program, but in some graduate courses more than 40% of students are from Latin America. There are approximately 6 million Catalan speakers in Catalonia and 9 million worldwide, which explains why all its programs are also available in Spanish (Castellano). Programs in English are mainly at the masters level and are focused on the European Educational Space, and usually have European-wide accreditation under the Bologna agreement.

UOC has produced a total of 35,000 graduates since its inception since 1996, and is now producing almost 6,000 graduates a year, with a degree completion rate of approximately 40% per annual cohort.

The online design model

UOC was the first fully online university designed from scratch. It has a relatively small core of 245 full-time faculty, who are mainly program co-ordinators and monitors. The UOC faculty hire 3,100 contract professors or 'counsellors' from other universities to design and deliver the courses. The university uses [a design model](#) that is standardized across the programs, using the in-house designed Virtual Campus digital online learning environment (a combination of a learning management system and online student administration system). Many of the courses have extensive printed support materials, in the form of specially designed course textbooks or manuals. Where provided, these are 'free' for students.

The course design places emphasis on regular student assignments, interaction with counsellors and other students, and prompt feedback. There is a major project underway to make all its programs compatible with mobile devices.

Courses and programs

UOC offers 15 undergraduate degree programs, 54 masters programs, and 31 post-graduate certificate programs. It has particularly strong coverage of information sciences and technologies, but does not have programs in 'hard' science or non-IT engineering.

It offers an international masters in e-learning, with over 300 enrollments per year. Partly as a result of a partnership with a university in Chile, 40% of the students in this masters are from Latin America. The program is also available as a European graduate program with extra modules in English. A certificate program in e-learning has been developed in partnership with the University of New Mexico, USA.

Innovation and research

UOC has a Vice Rector for Innovation and several support staff. The Vice Rector manages an annual innovation fund of 100,000 euros (C\$125,000). Departments bid on the fund through an RFP process. Projects are judged on the criteria of risk, results, success, and degree of innovation. Each year there is a chosen theme. Last year it was mobile learning. Once projects are evaluated, there is a strategy for implementing successful projects on a wider scale.

The Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) is an R&D unit focused on technology development, including enhancements and improvements to the Virtual Campus. It has been heavily involved in developing mobile apps and collecting them in a single portal. It is also responsible for managing the UOC portal and tools for online community services, such as blogs and Twitter, Facebook, and UOC's YouTube contributions. The OLT reports to the Vice

Rector Innovation.

The eLearn Centre was set up in 2009. It has 12 full-time staff and has an affiliated network of 245 e-learning professionals and researchers from UOC and other institutions who work collaboratively on online learning research and innovation projects. Much of its funding comes through external grants, in particular from European Commission projects, although it also has an active program for visiting scholars (two of the five visiting scholars have been Canadians). The eLearn Centre reports to the Vice Rector, Research.

The eLearn Centre has focused recently on the theme of the temporal dimension in online learning, including research on student learning rhythms, curricular timings, student time management, and feedback time. The centre produces a [regular journal on the time factor](#) in online learning. There are now four issues of this journal published to date. Other areas currently under investigation are e-portfolios and open educational resources.

The eLearn Centre also offers a doctorate in education and ICT (e-learning), currently with 13 Ph.D. students. This is a natural follow-on from its masters in e-Learning. It also offers internal training to UOC faculty and staff through an online teaching professional development program.

Accreditation

The university is accredited locally by the regional government of Catalonia. Most of its programs are also nationally accredited by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

The business model

The Catalan government created UOC as a foundation, with several commercial components which has enabled it to partner with commercial organizations such as La Caixa bank and the publisher Planeta. Profits from the commercial activities are ploughed back into the university component.

An annual grant from the Catalan Government covers about half of UOC's income. Student tuition and fees contribute a third of the total cost. The university makes up the remainder through its commercial and business activities. Its current operating budget is approximately 100 million euros a year (C\$125 million).

Tuition fees vary according to the program, but are in the range of 1,750 to 3,500 euros a year (C\$2,000 - C\$4,500) for a masters programs.

Challenges

As with all universities in Spain and Catalonia, UOC is facing uncertainty regarding its state funding, because of the economic crisis in Spain. In addition, there is a strong push from the Catalan government for full independence from Spain, which could have major implications

for European Commission funding as well as at a national level, at least in the short term. However, currently UOC has a balanced budget and is politically and financially well supported by the Catalan government, so is as well positioned for the future as any university in Spain.

A less life-threatening challenge is the need to integrate better research, innovation and teaching, each of which currently reports to different Vice Rectors. More importantly, ensuring that the results from UOC’s extensive research and innovation activities transfer to the 3,500 part-time instructors sufficiently to change their teaching practices remains a challenge.

Summary

What follows is a summary of these developments in the form of a table which looks at three questions:

What is a student at UOC able to do?

Why is this good for students?

and

How does UOC make it happen?

A UOC student is able to...	Why this is good for students	How UOC makes this happen
<p>Study at university level while working UOC offers bachelor, masters, doctoral and certificate programs fully online in a flexible manner, enabling working adults to take individual courses or a whole degree</p>	<p>Students can study at their own pace from home or work</p>	<p>Working with 3,500 part-time counsellors, UOC’s 245 full-time faculty develop and deliver online courses and programs through their Virtual Campus</p>
<p>Study in a language of choice Students can take courses in Spanish, Catalan or, in some cases, English.</p>	<p>Students from all over Spain and Latin America can take courses from UOC, as well as students who speak Catalan.</p>	<p>Courses are usually designed first in Catalan, then translated. The cost of translation</p>

	<p>Providing programs in Catalan strengthens both the minority language and the culture of Catalonia.</p> <p>Having courses in English allows students to earn credentials that have acceptance across Europe.</p>	<p>is more than covered by revenues from international students.</p> <p>UOC has developed partnerships with local institutions and worked with national and European accreditation agencies to ensure acceptance of qualifications from UOC</p>
<p>Access all learning materials and student services on mobile devices</p> <p>Not quite yet in place, this project will ensure that students can access UOC courses and services at any time and any place.</p>	<p>Enables students (and counsellors) to combine work, family, and study according to their own schedules.</p> <p>On-demand access to academic and personal support.</p>	<p>Funds allocated through the Innovation fund</p> <p>In-house development of appropriate software and portal for apps</p> <p>Ongoing support for faculty and students from the Office of Learning Technologies</p>
<p>Benefit from the latest developments in pedagogy and technology</p>	<p>Students feel that they are studying at a leading edge university</p> <p>Enables the development of 21st century skills and technology-ready graduates</p>	<p>Through its targeted funding for innovative teaching</p> <p>Through its Office of Learning Technologies that develops and test new technologies</p> <p>Through its eLearn Centre, which focuses on the interface between pedagogy, technology and evaluation of learning</p>
<p>Receive ongoing academic advice, support, feedback and assessment</p>	<p>Student graduation rates are as high as for full-time students in many North American universities.</p>	<p>Use of an army of part-time counsellors supervised by full-time UOC faculty</p> <p>Deliberate design of</p>

	Student satisfaction ratings are very high	interactive learning materials Multiple opportunities for social and academic interaction online between instructors and students
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The Seven Key Enabling Factors

In exploring with the senior leadership and key operational staff of UOC why these developments have occurred, we identified these factors:

1. **Strong political leadership.** The commitment of the Catalan government over the last 17 years, irrespective of which party was in control, has been strong, and remains strong even in the current difficult fiscal context. The university has become a key pillar of Catalan culture and society
2. **Economies of scale.** Within 16 years, UOC has reached 60,000 student enrollments per year and is currently producing nearly 6,000 degree graduates per year.
3. **Focus on teaching.** Although its small core of full-time faculty are expected to do research, this must focus on research into the information society: e-government, e-business and e-learning. The university's primary focus though is still teaching.
4. **Few tenured faculty.** There are approximately 12 part-time faculty/counsellors for every full-time faculty member and a clear division of roles between full-time and part-time faculty
5. **Favourable instructor to student ratios.** There are usually between 20-40 students per part-time instructor, enabling strong interaction and communication between students and instructors
6. **Technology.** The Virtual Campus has enabled all student administrative, human resource, marketing and financial systems to be entirely digitalized, as well as providing a constantly developing virtual learning environment. Flexibility has been considerably increased as a result of moving the system to open source software several years ago. The university's efforts to support internal research and development ensure it stays at the front edge of online learning developments.
7. **Staff and management dedicated to online learning.** Being created from scratch as an online university, it has benefited by attracting staff who are firmly committed to online learning. Both its Rectors to date have had a strong vision for online learning and the place of the university in a modern society.

These seven enablers have provided the base from which UOC is now a major international online open university.

These materials are based on the November 2012 visit to UOC's offices in Barcelona, Spain,

where extensive briefings, demonstrations, and interviews took place which included the senior leadership and key operational staff:

- Dr. Imma Tubella, Rectora
- Pere Fabra Abat, Vice-Rector, Academic
- Llorenç Valverde, Vice-Rector, Technology
- Teresa Sancho, Vice-Rector, Innovation
- Albert Sangra, Director, eLearn Centre
- Lourdes Guardia, eLearn Centre
- Marcelo Maina, eLearn centre
- Elena Barbera, eLearn Centre
- Magi Almirall, Head, Office of Learning Technologies
- Eva Gil, Office of Learning Technologies
- Marta Enrech, Director, Innovation Program
- Nuria Ferran, Innovation Program