

Quality challenges in inter-institutional collaboration about online international education

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Introduction

This chapter presents a European collaboration towards development and execution of online courses arranged by the Social Work Virtual Campus (SW-VirCamp). In 2004, a group of dedicated teachers started pioneering work that has become a sustainable study programme, integrated as electives in the partner institutions' Bachelor's programmes in social work. The project's pedagogical, ICT-supported base has been presented earlier (Larsen, Hole & Fahlvik, 2007; Larsen, Hole & Hoem, 2010; Larsen & Hole, 2014). Here, we will emphasise the challenges arising from ensuring quality and sustainability in online courses during a two-year EU project. Experiences from the collaboration are explored in light of factors for quality in education.

Background

The Virtual Classroom for Social Work in Europe (VIRCLASS) started in 2004, as a network of bachelor-level social worker educations led from the Høgskolen i Bergen (HiB) (Bergen University College).¹ The project directed academic efforts towards three areas: *education, development of new study-programmes* and *research*. From 2004-2008 Norgesuniversitetet (NUV) ('the Norwegian Opening Universities') granted funding for the development of several courses² in international social work and one course in e-pedagogy for teachers within higher education. From 2006 the network was established as a consortium, where the institutions took on the responsibility of sharing the costs and workload of the courses. From the start, cooperation between all involved parties was seen as essential to ensure high-quality, international e-learning courses. The participants met physically once a year for evaluation of the education and study-programmes, with discussion and decisions about changes concerning goals, results achieved and economy. The consortium agreement regulated cooperation and obligations, as well as rights to the learning material that was created. From 2003 to 2008 the partners were cooperating closely to develop and execute international web-based studies with competence-based programmes and new virtual learning material. With these experiences as a backdrop the partners wanted to develop a virtual campus,

1 Associate Professor Anne Karin Larsen at HiB has been the project leader for the VIRCLASS and SW-VirCamp projects.

2 All courses are web-based, arranged in English and are offered and executed by the cooperating partner institutions.

SW-VirCamp.

The Social Work Virtual Campus: SW-VirCamp

In 2008 the VIRCLASS consortium took the initiative to apply for the EU's *Lifelong Learning Programme*,³ and new partners were invited in. Twelve partners⁴ from nine European countries joined the application from the VIRCLASS steering committee. To ensure a broad foundation and common ownership of the project, the applications were written by the project leader, steering committee and the other partners. Members of several international offices with knowledge of EU terminology, the EU's goals for educational policy and the application procedures participated in the application process, since LLL projects should contribute towards achieving the EU's educational policy goals.

In a time of global insecurity and economic crisis, the European Commission sees the modernisation of higher education as central to meeting the challenges facing Europe. Work towards this goal started in 1999 with the Bologna declaration (European Commission 1999) and the following Bologna Process for developing a common area for higher education in Europe.⁵ The coordination of educations offered led to introducing three cycles within higher education (Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D. studies), a common grading system (A-F) and the introduction of ECTS Credits⁶ in 46 countries.⁷ In parallel, internal and external evaluation of the *quality* of education offered was required, which led to the creation of international (like the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)) and national (like the Norwegian NOKUT) organs for controlling the quality systems of educational institutions.

In view of later trends in Europe, the role of educational institutions in economic growth is increasingly emphasised. The Bologna reform clearly expressed the need for *quality* and *relevancy* in the education offered, while the Lisbon strategy from 2002 emphasised the knowledge-based society's need to *educate more people*; that is, the institutions need to both recruit more young people who complete their studies and facilitate further education for their alumni. *IT-supported education* and *increased internationalisation* emerged as important instruments to achieve the goal of a workforce armed to meet both today's and future challenges (Lisbon strategy, 2002). The

3 Call for Proposals 2008 (EAC/30/07) Erasmus Programme: Erasmus Virtual Campuses under the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. Reference number: 142767-LLP-1-2008-1-NO-ERASMUS-EVC.

4 Partners were the Bergen University College, Norway (project leader); Inholland University of Applied Science, The Netherlands; Complutense University, Madrid, Spain; Hälsohögskolan i Jönköping, Sweden; Miguel Torga University College, Coimbra, Portugal; Mannheim University of Applied Sciences, Germany; University of Swansea, Wales, Great Britain; Mittweida University of Applied Sciences, Germany; University of Liepaja, Latvia; Bodø University College, Norway; University of Lusofona, Portugal and Kempen Katholieke Hogeschool, Belgium.

5 In Norway brought about as the "Quality Reform" – St.meld. nr. 27 (2000–2001).

6 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation Transfer System (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ects_en.htm). (Downloaded 29th of May 2014).

7 At least, introduction was decided.

partners behind SW-VirCamp felt that a new virtual campus could contribute towards this.

Defined goals and fields of activities

The overall goal for the two-year project reached far beyond VIRCLASS. The objective was to better prepare future social workers for the needs of a knowledge-based, multicultural society by offering a specialisation in international social work (IS) during the Bachelor's programme, with the possibility to achieve up to 75 ECTS credits (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Model of SW-VirCamp – international specialisation as part of a bachelor's programme.

Experiences from VIRCLASS led to an emphasis on developing courses that can be offered as electives in the students' bachelor's programmes. The first years, the VIRCLASS courses were offered in addition to the ordinary programme. Completing an Internet-based course held in English parallel with campus studies turned out to be very demanding, and the result was a large amount of drop-outs. Some of the partners managed to include the VIRCLASS courses as electives in ordinary bachelor's programmes; at these all students completed their courses. It therefore became important for completion that the new courses were included in the bachelor's programmes of the partners.⁸

The different Work Packages

To reach the goal, the application sketched seven *Work Packages* (WP), in accordance with the EU-application's template. In WP1, the premises for going from a virtual classroom to developing a virtual campus with a specialisation in international social work were to be surveyed, while WP2

⁸ Experiences from the pilot course in Community Work the spring of 2010 supported this. 51 students started, but 28 disappeared during the two first weeks due to having trouble integrating the course with other activities. See Larsen 2010, p.16.

should develop and arrange an e-learning course in community work⁹. WP3 was to create virtual learning material with video lectures, audio-visual triggers that stimulate reflection and discussion, and a video-based case to integrate theory and practice in the new module, while WP4 dealt with the project management. WP5 was to create promotion materials and raise awareness among different stakeholders, while WP6 should make a quality guide for web-based studies in a virtual campus. The last work package, WP7, was to disseminate the results in articles, at conferences and on websites.

There was planned a number of concrete subtasks for each work package, with schedules and assignment of which partners would lead and who should participate in the different work packages. The tasks were completed, and at the end of the project seven institutions signed the new consortium agreement, while two signed a letter of intent to offer the courses to a limited amount of students (Edmark, 2010; Hole, Wouters & Olsson, 2010; Larsen, 2010).

The work to ensure quality and sustainability

Quality is a term of many dimensions (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). However, over time it has been agreed upon that quality in higher education can be viewed as *exception*, as *perfection*, as *fitness for purpose*, as *value for money* and as *transformative* (Harvey & Green, 1993). Professional studies have always emphasised high-quality programmes in order to educate professionals of a standard that meets society's needs, but the deliberate and law-regulated focus on quality within higher education appeared as a consequence of the Bologna process (Harvey, 2011; Aamodt, Wiers-Jenssen & Stensaker, 2012). Quality may be measured either by using quantifiable standards, or by choosing a more procedural observation of the work related to ensuring quality. Regardless of approach, quality is a relative term which always must be contextualised.

We will show how an internal quality guide for SW-VirCamp was developed, with standards and indicators in accordance with Harvey (2011). This maintained measurement of the following: Organisational framework, Students' satisfaction with the course, Academic requirements and Achieved competence. Since EU-applications shall reflect the overall educational policy goals of the EU, more procedural factors about quality in education was emphasised both in the application and in the final report (Larsen, 2012, p. 21–22). During the project the partners thus sought, in different ways, to maintain elements like ensuring the course's relevance to the labour market, ensuring that the students accepted had the necessary qualifications for completing the course; and that they, throughout the course, received the desired competences through a study-programme with relevant learning outcomes, high-quality learning material and good teaching and

⁹ Community Work from an International Perspective: 15 ECTS (<http://vircamp.net/e-courses-centre/community-work/>). (Downloaded 29th of May 2014).

supervision from competent teachers. Hindsight showed that some of the work packages were especially central to this, and we will further examine how these WPs were carried out.

Implementation of the project

The work towards a good and sustainable web-course started with writing the application. One of the partners had a lot of experience with such EU-projects, and supplied useful input regarding goal formulation and the development of the application. Based on experiences from VIRCLASS, a SWOT analysis was done at the start of the application-process. This surveyed the project's *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats*. Strengths and weaknesses indicate inner factors of projects, while opportunities and threats come from without (the Community Tool-box, undated). The analysis demonstrated what had to be developed further in order to reach the goal of a virtual campus, and uncovered critical points that could threaten the execution of the project. The EU application was accepted; the project received funding from the EU's *Lifelong Learning Programme – Virtual Campus*, and started in October of 2008. As a part of WP1 a new SWOT analysis was completed in November of 2009 and the result is presented in Astray, Veenkamp & Larsen (2009, p. 53).

A good start

A kick-off meeting at the start of the project gave everyone common point of departure. Academic leaders from all the partner institutions came to Bergen, and all project participants and the administrative group from HiB joined the meeting. The leaders of the different work packages presented the ideas behind the application and their plans for further work. They built upon the projects' strengths and possibilities, while considering the weaknesses and threats uncovered by the SWOT analysis. The work of determining what a virtual campus *is, should be* or *can be* started. The application's goals and plans for deliverables were brought up and discussed, and the participants' understanding of different maps, pictures and visions were outlined. For instance, central actors in VIRCLASS presented various possibilities for productive cooperation between students via the Internet, and also how visual learning material in the form of virtual 'triggers' (short video and/or audio presentations) can stimulate the students' learning. The presentations were useful for those who had no previous knowledge of e-learning, and led to a fruitful discussion about how this could be used in future courses (minutes from the kick-off meeting 22.-23. October, 2008).

This meeting was important to establish contact and start the collaboration between the established and the new partners. Immediately following the meeting the programme planning group started their work. The emphasis on concrete tasks eased integration of the newcomers. The

partners who had developed VIRCLASS had a solid foundation from having made common programmes, high-quality virtual learning material and courses based on a fundamental student-active learning form and well-founded e-pedagogy, and thus formed a highly competent cooperative. The new partners shared their thoughts and knowledge, becoming important inspirations in the further work. In all, 27 people participated these four days, and the friendly tone and high spirits contributed to enthusiasm and determination.

Work groups related to the work packages

A comprehensive workload was to be done in two years. Establishing cooperation with openness and trust between the various actors was important in order to facilitate knowledge sharing. The project based its collaboration mainly on web conferences and web meetings. It was therefore important to come together face-to-face at the Kick-off meeting to get the project anchored in the organisations; this made a good platform for further cooperation.

Five working groups performed the work on the seven work packages (see figure 2). Further communication between project participants took place through some physical meetings/seminars and countless web conferences, using an electronic conference room,¹⁰ Skype and MSN. Additionally, various Web 2.0 applications like blogs, Google Docs and other tools were used during the project period. While some participants had long experience working synchronously (conference rooms, Skype and MSN) and asynchronously (blogs, Google Docs) using digital tools, this was entirely new to others. As previously seen, good structure and focused planning caused such virtual arenas for cooperation to be experienced as fruitful and useful (Larsen, Hole & Fahlvik, 2007). The use of such tools at this stage of the project were also useful as preparation for tutoring students using such communication tools, in accordance with VIRCLASS' hands-on training from the start in 2004 (Larsen, Hole & Hoem, 2010)¹¹. Minutes and summaries from the meetings, both the physical and the virtual, were made available to everyone on the project website¹². Reflection and exchange of experiences was also stimulated through interviews/conversations with the teacher group in several curriculum planning group meetings. At the request of the teachers, a joint teacher's blog was created; this was used as a reflection arena during the pilot course. This productive collaboration across the institutions – involving teachers and employees from media centres and administration – greatly contributed to a high-quality, sustainable virtual campus being established during the project.

10 The conference room used was VITERO (<http://vitero.eu/en/home.html>). (Downloaded 29th of May 2014).

11 As part of ensuring the future of the project the course *E-pedagogy for Teachers in Higher Education* was developed and executed during the spring of 2008 and offered again to partners the spring of 2009, Online available: <http://www.virclass.net/eped>. (Downloaded 29th of May 2014).

12 <http://www.vircamp.net/old>. (Downloaded 29th of May 2014).

In the following, the work on the work packages which contributed the most to ensuring high quality in the course will be presented.

Project management (WP 4)

Work package 4 concerned administration and leadership, and it was decided that the VIRCLASS project manager was to lead the EU project. Skilled administrative co-workers from the international office and economy section at Bergen University College helped with reporting and budgeting, and formed, along with the project leader, the project administration group. The steering committee consisted of four people from the VIRCLASS collaboration, reinforced with one new member. The responsibility of leading the different work packages was distributed between the steering committee members. The project also had a leading group (Consortium Management), composed of leaders from all partners (see figure 2). In parallel with the new project VIRCLASS executed the other web-based courses offered by the consortium.

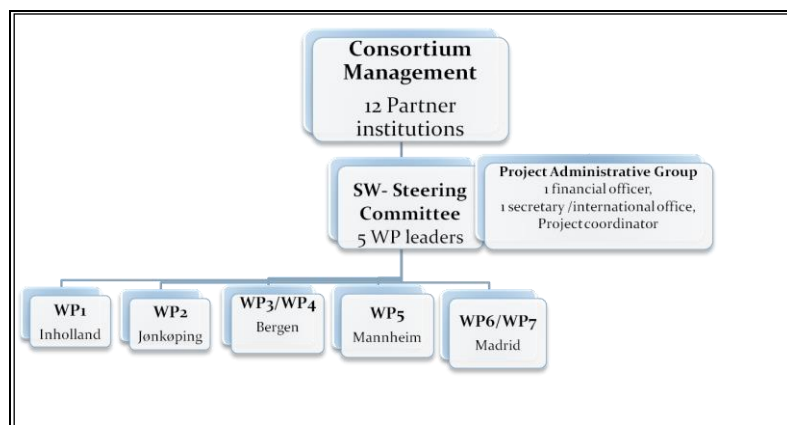


Figure 2: Project organisation model for SW-VirCamp 2008-2010.

Leadership is demanding, and requires having a constant overview and focus on the goals, ensuring that good routines are preserved, and making clear to others *what* has to be done *when* in order to keep up with the planned schedule. Meanwhile, each individual needs to have the freedom to use their knowledge and abilities when performing their assigned tasks. It is necessary to inspire and stimulate the work, and maintain enthusiasm for the tasks to be done. This fundamental leadership philosophy from VIRCLASS was developed further in SW-VirCamp. Partners characterised the project leader thus (Edmark, 2010, p24):

«In the early stages you could not see where it was going, but she kind of had a vision of how things would develop. And worked towards materializing – making a reality of that vision. She has done a very good job’ (R4). ‘I don’t have the idea that this is HER project, it is OUR project. But we need somebody that is in the lead’

(R1) ».

Being the leader meant clarifying the framework from the EU, determining what changes were allowed based on the conditions in the application, as well as having an overview of and being able to direct the tasks that were given the different leaders and participants. While the administrative tasks had to be done, it was also necessary to stimulate and preserve the academic work and, not least, the social processes. Thousands of e-mails passed between the participants.

The project's external evaluator's report reveals (Edmark, 2010, p 24):

«One of the credits given Bergen (as the leading partner) is referring to the ambition not to hold on to but to share the “ownership” and responsibility of the project with the partners, by building an organisation that is aimed at participation, cooperation and sustainability. ‘But’, as one of the interviewed claims, ‘as the universities of Europe are a split and complex world we would never had gained a cooperation without somebody taking the lead and main responsibility’ (R3).

Obviously there is a need for a driving force, “a power machine”, but at the same time the awareness of a potential risk: ‘It is a balance. The balance between the need for somebody to take decisions centrally and the need to involve everybody in the decisions...I think it worked well’ (R4)’ ».

As shown in figure 2, the project had a hierarchical structure, with the project leader and steering committee central to ensuring the progress of the work. Good cooperation and collaboration between the different levels and between leaders and participants was necessary to achieve success. Even with great support from the project administrative group, the administrative processes were time-consuming and left less time for the leader's work with academic processes. The expectations from the EU administration, with possible sanctions of reduced funding if goals were not reached, contributed to a special focus on the administrative tasks. There was frequent and close communication between the project manager and the leaders of the other work packages. The summary shows 49 deliverables in the form of meeting minutes, progression plans, budget plans and reports etc. in this work package.

It was important to ensure processes which stimulated thinking and reflection en route to the goals, but the EU funding included no funding for research. From the experiences with VIRCLASS, the partners wished to maintain the focus on *education, developing new study programmes and research* in SW-VirCamp. Early on, it was decided to start normative process research in line with the principles of participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) and action learning (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2008). This was in accordance with basic approaches in community work, where participation, emancipation and empowering are central (Larsen, Sewpaul & Hole, 2014).

This way, professional questions were taken care of and stimulated through the spiral of action research: collection of data, feedback to participants, reflection and evaluation before the next step in the process of project development. For instance, a mid-way evaluation was conducted by distributing questionnaires to all participants, which deliberately asked questions designed to trigger thoughts about what would be required to ensure sustainability of the project beyond the project period. Reflection and sharing of experience was stimulated through group interviews/conversations within the teacher group in several of the meetings related to development and execution of a pilot course in community work (work package 2). Through several questionnaires, the students told how they experienced the course, and their feedback was taken seriously and led to adjustments, both during the course and for the following courses (Larsen & Hole, 2014).

Exploring the premises for a virtual campus (WP 1)

The premises for a virtual campus were to be mapped in work package 1, through collecting information from the partner institutions. This was summarised in a report with an overview of the various institutions' limits and opportunities for integrating international courses in their programmes. The report formed the foundation for the written agreement about the future virtual campus, and making this report was a subtask in work package 1. The process was planned to take three months, but lasted the entire project period. This process was important to reaching the main goal of the project: facilitating a future virtual campus. This is emphasised in the confidential section of the final report (Bergsvik 2010, p8):

«WP1.1 is not of a 'preparatory' character, as it may seem from the application, but has worked as vital preparation for the continuation of the SW-VirCamp after the project period»

The survey started as a questionnaire distributed to all partners. This had the SWOT analysis as its starting point, but the draft was further developed through several rounds of discussion between the steering committee and others experienced in making questionnaires. The surveys should explore how the individual institutions had adapted to the Bologna reform's intentions towards a common arena for educations in Europe. The first part asked about organisational structure and matters related to the study programmes and, among other things, shed light on how many working hours were behind each ECTS credit, the length of the study week/year, the structure of the Bachelor's programmes (including smallest and largest subject) and to what extent there were practice replacements. Furthermore, the survey asked whether students could select specialisations, and where in the study programme this was offered. The survey also gave further information about the practical organisation of the Bachelor's programmes, scheduling of holidays, the number of full time/part time students and the minimum/maximum number of student per course.

The second part of the questionnaire surveyed the possibilities for participating in future international specialisation: What international courses were offered by each institution, what would be required to integrate SW-VirCamp with the offered courses, and which economic resources were included here? Questions about ICT facilities and the use of these were also asked.

The questionnaire was distributed before Christmas 2008, and the report was planned to be finished early in the 2009. Processing the answers from the survey took time, and they were seen as vital to ensure that the goals for a new virtual campus were reached. More information about the opportunities to integrate international courses in the bachelor's degree was also required, and six questions related to internationalisation of the study programmes were later sent via e-mail to the twelve academic leaders. This e-mail was followed by individual telephone interviews to clarify what would be required for each institution to offer such courses to their students.

The survey showed how great the differences were between the institutions, and how difficult it can be to change programmes and adjust common modules in pre-existing programmes. Even if all the partners held to the principles of the Bologna declaration, there were large divergences in how these were interpreted. Figures 3 and 4 show how differently the Bologna reform's requirements were interpreted in Europe – and even within the same country.

INSTITUTION	years/ BA	ECTS credits/ BA	hours/ECTS credits	Hours in the BA
P4 JÖNKÖPING	3,5	210	35	7350
P2 INHOLLAND	4	240	28	6720
P6 MANNHEIM	3,5	210	30	6300
P3 COMPLUTENSE	4	240	25	6000
P9 LIEPAJAS	4	160	35	5600
P5 MIQUEL TORGA	3,5	210	25	5250
P8 MITTWEIDA	3	180	30	5400
P1 BERGEN	3	180	25	4500
P12 KHKEMPEN	3	180	25	4500
P11 LUSOFONA	3	180	25	4500
P7 SWANSEA	3	180	20	3600
P10 BODØ	3	180	20	3600

Figure 3: Overview of the length of the bachelor's programme and how many ECTS-credits there are included in each (2008).

As we can see, there are great differences in the structure of a bachelor's degree programme in social work. While a bachelor's degree is stipulated to take three years, there is a variance from three to four years amongst the twelve partner institutions. Six of them have either five or six semesters in their BA-degree. A full time study shall normally give 30 credits per semester, and it is recommended that there, in total¹³ are 25-30 working hours behind each credit. The survey revealed considerable variance here too. Only one partner did not give 30 credits per semester, but there was a great discrepancy in the amount of working hours between each credit. By summarising these

13 Organised teaching and individual academic work.

factors we see that the expected amount of working hours in a bachelor's degree varies from 3600 to more than twice that – 7350 for the Swedish university college. This discrepancy is not only between different countries; the survey also revealed internal differences between the Norwegian, Portuguese and German partners.

However, the result presumes that the questions are interpreted uniformly, and that the same phenomena are reported. Even if the questionnaires aimed for clear and concise questions, they may have been misinterpreted by some. Another explanation may be that the partner institutions had not come as far in the process of adopting the Bologna reform at the end of 2008-2009. If the survey was repeated today, the answers might be more uniform.

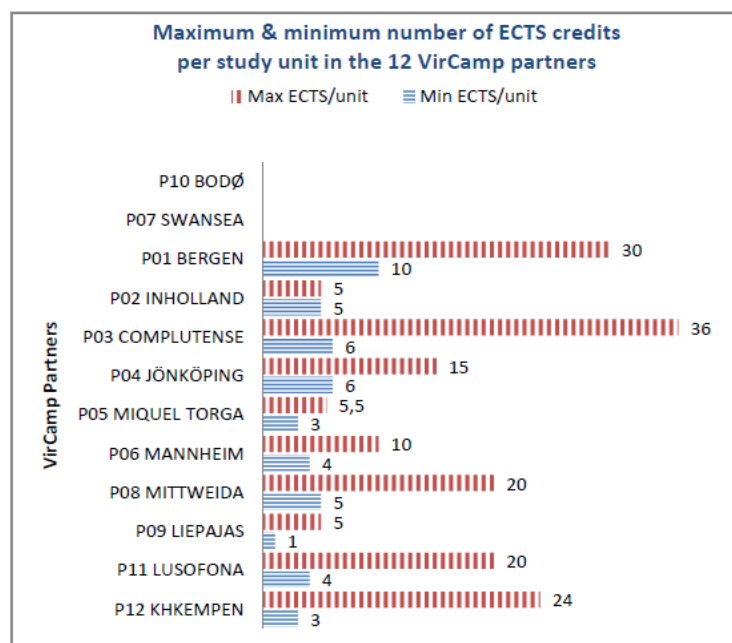


Figure 4: Overview over the smallest and largest study units which can be integrated in the study programme (2008).

The collaboration in VIRCLASS and SW-VirCamp revealed large differences in the courses/topics offered to the students by the partner institutions. Meanwhile, the ability to integrate the course from SW-VirCamp as an elective module in the bachelor's degree was a central condition for the survival of the project beyond 2010. Figure 4 gives an overview of the size of the study units in the bachelor's programmes, which varies from one to thirty-six credits. For instance, the course in community work might, with a certain degree of flexibility from the partner institutions, be integrated into the study programme – either by replacing three of the largest subjects (P09 Liepaja) or by letting the course replace two elements of 14 credits (P06 Mannheim).

Thus, the thorough exploring of 'banal factors', like the length of the study year, working hours behind a credit and the sizes of courses in the BA degree, led to important information about a 'least common multiple' for a course that might be integrated into the partners' BA degree programmes. Other factors, like the length of the study year and scheduling of holidays, were

equally important for determining when the courses of the SW-VirCamp could best be offered. Thus, the work with WP1 clearly was the most difficult and most important work to ensure a sustainable structure for the future virtual campus. This had been underestimated considerably in the application. But prolonging the work package or transferring allocated resources between the work packages had to be approved by the EU-administration, and this entailed a lot of extra work as well as sanctions by way of a poor midway evaluation. In the confidential section of the final report feedback was given that, while a project by nature needs to have some built-in flexibility, the rigid requirements given in the EU projects conflicts with a process- and learning-oriented approach to project work (Bergsvik, 2010).

Promotion, 'Exploitation' and Dissemination: WP 5

Central to all EU projects is securing the further operation, and optimal utilisation of the results, when the project period is over. For this reason, it was important to create a sense of ownership to what was developed, and ensure support for the idea of a virtual campus and future offering of the courses from VIRCLASS and SW-VirCamp. Disseminating the results will also promote a sense of community – the analysis of what has been done strengthen one's awareness of what is developed, and it is satisfactory to present the product to others. Thus work package 5 was important to anchor the project at every level within the institutions.

At the same time, great emphasis was placed on conveying information about the project to the professional field. Surveys of what competences the professional field wanted future colleagues to possess were taken during the project to ensure the *relevance* of the achieved competencies (Harvey, 2011). This started with a questionnaire given all students of social work in the twelve partner institutions, as well as alumni and others in the professional fields. This questionnaire also had the SWOT analysis as its starting point, and explored the interest for e-learning and for an international course in community work. 225 people answered the survey. Many were very positive both towards e-learning and a virtual campus, but there was also a certain degree of scepticism as to whether they themselves could participate in a course like this. After the survey, seven of the partner institutions conducted in-depth interviews with, altogether, 55 people from 32 trade unions or other organisations. Here they explored the interest in the professional field for community-work courses, web-based education and the possibilities professionals had of participating in such courses. The survey provided valuable information for developing courses that corresponded to the professional field's wish for competence amongst new graduates, and courses that might be used to offer further education; in accordance with the principles behind the Lisbon strategy and the principles of Lifelong Learning.

An important part of work package 5 was to develop promotion material for the project and

the courses. There were three very different target groups – the education institutions, the students, and the professional field – and the information was tailor-made in three different pamphlets. The information to the professionals built on the SWOT analyses and the results of the survey. Prior to the work with the pamphlets, findings from work package 1 were carefully reviewed to explore how participation in a future virtual campus could help partners in attaining important EU educational objectives. The information material emphasised that participation gave access to complete courses following the Bologna principles with ECTS credentials made to fit their own BA programme, courses offered in English and opportunities for increased internationalisation as well as increased IT competence both amongst students and staff. Consistent slogans were «SW-VirCamp: – internationalisation at home» and «Campus without borders».

In addition to pamphlets, templates for PowerPoint, reports, meeting evaluation et al. were made available to the partners, and three ready-made PowerPoint presentations in English, to be translated to their own language, conveyed various aspects of the project for use in presentations to colleagues, students or professionals.

The application had not specifically mentioned the development of a website, but this is implicit in the EU's expectations for projects. The website was made by HiB, and was crucial in disseminating information about the work during the project period. After the project period it has also served as an archive¹⁴.

Compiling a quality guide (WP 6)

The work with a quality guide (Astray, Larsen, Veenkamp & Hole, 2010) for a virtual campus with several web-based courses was a demanding task which was done by a smaller group. The leader for this work package was central in the creation of this tool. He started by thoroughly going through the status of the field, which resulted in a four-page overview of relevant literature, websites and tools. The literature was complex and fragmented and rendered little support for structuring the guide. Important influences included the EU project *Free Technology Academy* and Ehlers and Parowsky's (2008) book *Handbook of Quality and Standardisation in E-Learning*.

The questionnaire for work package 1 (surveying the premises for a virtual campus) in December 2008 included five questions related to the quality systems at the partner institutions. This did not supply sufficient information, and a new questionnaire about their quality systems was sent all the partner institutions to ensure that the quality guide for SW-VirCamp could be accepted and integrated by the partners. The objective was to find elements which recurred at several of the partners and - at best - reveal factors common to all. However, there was nothing common which could be further developed into a quality guide for the virtual campus. The task included

¹⁴ <http://vircamp.net/old/>. (Downloaded 29th of May 2014).

determining a model and identifying the specific areas for quality control which should be described using detailed criteria, procedure-descriptions and control forms. Lessons learnt from both VIRCLASS and the new project were analysed, and was important for the development of the quality guide.

The quality guide

The quality guide (Astray, Larsen, Veenkamp & Hole, 2010) begins with a manifesto defining the objectives and responsibilities of the quality work. The main objective is to be a practical guide that defines the quality principles SW-VirCamp is built on, clarifies desired quality standards and indicators related to these, and suggests various ways to obtain necessary information. It is divided into three main parts. The first concerns *effort and resources* needed prior to starting a course, the second is related to *processes and practice* during the course, while the last deals with *results and competence* to be achieved during the courses. While part 1 has sixteen standards, part 2 has three and part 3 five different standards.

One of the standards in part 1, standard 1.5, addresses the programme for a given study period.¹⁵ The objective is that the student receives adequate information and sufficient resources to achieve the desired learning outcome in the period, so that they can complete the course. As figure 5 shows, there is defined eleven indicators for study quality related to this area.


15 “The Weekly Programme” is used as the name for each study period, even if it frequently spans a longer period than one week.

Standard 1.5. Weekly Programme

All the SW-VirCamp courses are described in a detailed and informative written online document that will, on weekly basis, inform its participants about the milestones of the course.

Indicators

- The Weekly Programme includes at least the following components:
 - 1.5.1. Week number and dates.
 - 1.5.2. Subject to be studied during the week.
 - 1.5.3. Learning objectives for the week/period.
 - 1.5.4. Study Methods.
 - 1.5.5. Contents for the specified period.



- 1.5.6. Tasks for the specified period.
- 1.5.7. Task deadlines.
- 1.5.8. Task feedback deadlines.
- 1.5.9. Assessment criteria for tasks.
- 1.5.10. Recommended readings.
- 1.5.11. Active web links to needed course materials, e.g. screen lectures, triggers, virtual case, etc.

Figure 5: Standard with indicators for the weekly programmes.

A check-list for this standard has been developed:

SW-VirCamp course id:.....

student
 teacher
 Expert assessor
 Other (specify):

Weekly Plan checklist

Please, check the Weekly plan of the SW-VirCamp course (NAME OF THE COURSE) and answer if it includes the following elements. When the elements are included in the curriculum plan, please rate them from 0 (not adequate at all) to 4 (completely adequate). Please, comment your answers in the blank space below

	Yes	0	1	2	3	4
1.5.1. Week number and dates.						
1.5.2. Subject to be studied during the week.						
1.5.3. Learning objectives for the week/period.						
1.5.4. Study Methods						
1.5.5. Weekly contents.						
1.5.6. Weekly tasks.						
1.5.7. Tasks deadlines.						
1.5.8. Tasks feedback deadlines.						
1.5.9. Assessment criteria for tasks						
1.5.10. Weekly recommended readings.						
1.5.11. Active web links to needed course materials, as screen lectures, triggers, electronic case, etc.						

COMMENTS: _____

Figure 6: Check-list for standard 1.5: Weekly Programmes

A central idea behind the EU application was that SW-VirCamp should be an organisation with equal partners. The new agreement clarifies that the management of the consortium rotates among

the partners, with replacement every third year. By describing knowledge and experiences from VIRCLASS and SW-VirCamp as procedures in the written guide, quality may be ensured in future changes of leadership.

Hindsight shows us that for some of the processes, the experiences from previous collaborative efforts are not sufficient to ensure good routines. Student evaluations of the courses in VIRCLASS were well established, and it was only necessary to adjust the evaluations in accordance with the guide to facilitate reporting. The results from the course evaluations are discussed in the yearly meetings, and any adjustments are performed if necessary. However, after three years there is a need for improved routines for evaluation of the administrative procedures, as well an evaluation form for these. Work on this has started, and an overview of administrative tasks, with schedules and responsibilities will be created.

How did the work on the different work packages contribute towards ensuring SW-VirCamp's quality?

Since the EU project was tufted on experiences from the VIRCLASS cooperation, the partners had a lot of knowledge about benefits and pitfalls when they developed new ICT-based courses adapted to an international arena. The experience was made clear through the SWOT analyses, which formalised this partly 'tacit' knowledge. The project manager and the steering committee started with the project's strengths and opportunities, and improved these further. At the same time they could consciously focus on countering the weaknesses and threats. They emphasised including everyone in the process, ensuring the information flow and the progressing towards both the overarching goal of a virtual campus for social work and the tasks related to this.

We have particularly explored how the participants – through work package 6 – developed a quality guide that would maintain important aspects of quality in international, flexible study programmes. It is a useful tool for ensuring good and stable execution of the activity when new colleagues eventually start, and supports the possibility of a sustainable continuation. Such a quality guide is essential to maintain that which may be measured by quantitative indicators, such as schedules as the 'weekly programme' and assignments (Harvey, 2011). When it comes to the more procedural elements related to the *Lifelong Learning* programme and the overall goals of the EU, we see that effort in all the work packages contributed in different ways. The SWOT analysis' identification of 'critical points' enabled the survey of conditions at the institutions (work package 1) and the promotion and dissemination of the project (work package 5) towards addressing these factors. Revealing relevant information for integrating new, international, courses in the institutions' Bachelor's degree programmes was central to addressing challenges related to quality and sustainability. The exchange of knowledge and information-sharing was essential when it came to identifying the 'least common multiple' required for the SW-VirCamp courses to be adapted to fit

into existing Bachelor's programmes. Work package 1 also identified important aspects related to admission quality, which is important for the students' ability to complete the courses they start. Meanwhile, the work related to conveying the project in work package 5 was crucial to make the programme relevant for the professional field and to ensuring that the courses in SW-VirCamp's portfolio give professionals around Europe the required competence to meet the requirements of a global economy. This was central in both the Bologna declaration and the Lisbon strategy, and the EU has not less emphasised its importance in later policy documents (EU Commission, 2010; EU Commission, 2011).

In other publications, we have shown how the objectives of work packages 2 and 3, related to developing a competence-based programme, excellent learning resources and a highly skilled staff that utilise resources from the Internet in the teaching, was ensured (Larsen, Visser-Rotgan & Hole, 2011; Larsen, Henriksbø & Hole, 2011).

That the EU project could be continued as a sustainable consortium was due to a fundamentally sound effort and completion of all tasks outlined in the application. The final evaluation from the EU Commission was very satisfying, with an average of eight out of possible ten points¹⁶. Summarising the work, it must be emphasised that building an identity and a sense of community was central to the effort. The development of a visual identity and efforts to facilitate a transparent, open, inclusive learning community made it possible to create a platform for international, comparative studies within European social work.

The future of SW-VirCamp

Ensuring continuation and implementation of the results after the project period is important, and an effort towards this started early. The report from work package 1 was sent to all the partners, and adjusted after their comments – for instance, the application's formulation “*international specialisation*” was changed to “the opportunity for *international in depth studies*”. For SW-VirCamp, this meant that the e-learning modules from VIRCLASS and SW-VirCamp may be integrated as electives in the Bachelor's programmes in social work. This also required the partner institutions to include the opportunities for such optional courses in their study programmes (see figure 1).¹⁷ The most important factor to ensure sustainability and quality in SW-VirCamp has been the signing of a new consortium agreement¹⁸, with a new administrative and financial model. While the EU project was 75 percent externally financed, SW-VirCamp is now fully financed by the partner organisations. A *voluntary model* with decentralised admission of students, shared teaching

¹⁶ <http://vircamp.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/EACEA-assessment.pdf>. (Downloaded 29th of May 2014).

¹⁷ Only Complutense University has managed to implement this as of writing.

¹⁸ The Consortium Agreement – SW-VirCamp, October, 2010:

http://vircamp.net/ep_tmp/files/16279931924cf7633d04549.pdf. (Downloaded 29th of May 2014)

tasks in the courses, cooperation on research was agreed upon. Future developmental work had to be financed by external means. It was also decided to update the web portal. There is still a coordinator for the consortium from the leading partner institution, but with fewer tasks than before¹⁹. All partners contribute towards covering an institutional fee equivalent to 40 work-days for the coordinator plus actual expenses, while other tasks are distributed between the partners. By this, the fruitful collaboration from the EU project is continued in a vibrant, virtual campus for social work – across the borders of Europe.

19 The leading partner is responsible for coordinating the consortium, arranging meetings for the board and leaders, being the web editor and managing the quality assurance effort.

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