Managing the Virtual University: A Real Experience

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Abstract: The North Catholic University Foundation is a virtual university, characterized by its virtual education model which obviously impacts its functions of teaching, extension, research, internationalization/outreach. This institution is private in nature, recognized by the Colombian government in 1997 by Resolution 1761 adopted by the Ministry of Education, and belongs to the Diocese of Santa Rosa de Osos, in the northern department of Antioquia. E-learning as an institutional mark, and ratified by the persistence of its policies, has over 15 years of institutional life, necessarily demands administrative and financial management to ensure sustainability, a point of balance and fulfilling the founding mission: to bring comprehensive education and contexts to houses where students live and work, with the mediation of information and communication technologies, ICT. In addition, it adapted, without overlapping or ignoring the Colombian education policy framework and business despite the natural gaps that still persist in these areas. In short, they are facing administrative and educational innovation. Socializing the administrative experience and financial management of the virtual school as a way of transferring knowledge is what motivates this paper.

Key words: e-learning; virtual workers; virtual enterprise' manage the unseen and planning phase

JEL code: M190

1. Context: Virtual Educational Enterprise

When ending the last decade of the twentieth century, the founders and directors of the nascent North Catholic University Foundation made the decision to create the first virtual college of Colombia, they also faced the challenge of another way to manage an institution. Indeed, 15 years after that decision, the experience of managing this virtual educational enterprise, matches with the reflections of Rojas (2006, p. 82) quoted—Boilers, Gonzalez de Celis, Barcia & Chacon (2010, p. 129)—in terms of tackling a new form of management characterized by understanding and responding to social and human change. This is characterized by a world embedded within the rapid development of information technologies and telecommunications.

The North Catholic University Foundation is an institution of higher education in Colombia, belonging to the Diocese of Santa Rosa deOsos in northern Antioquia. It is private university, approved and recognized by the Ministry of Education, MEN.

The organization is characterized by the virtual education model supported naturally in information and communication technologies, ICT, pedagogical-didactic take on meaning and communicatively—creative in the teaching-learning process. Consequently, the methodology is defined as the creation of virtual learning

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environments, using ICT agreements to generate applied relevant knowledge, impacts and transform the contexts of interest of students, teachers and administrators. This model is defined as open, flexible and relevantly focused on identified needs and the learning pace of the learner, and allowing deliberate processes of interaction, collaboration and cooperation in the acquisition of learning and knowledge. In addition to the above, the virtual education model of this institution responds naturally to the substantive functions of teaching, research, extension and internationalization, as well as the demands of society and community.

In three decades of institutional life there are students and teachers present in 91 municipalities in the department of Antioquia, 27 departments of Colombia, and in 17 countries (Angola, Argentina, Brazil, Cape Verde, China, Ecuador, Egypt, Spain, United States, Guatemala, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Peru, United Kingdom, Dominican Republic and Venezuela).

Based on the above, from the experience of the Northern Catholic University Foundation, the virtual educational enterprise with a human response to the demand and need for training people in skills and abilities required for the globalized world for insertion into the new economy as Epper states (2004, p. 13) is driven by technology, telecommunications and the advancement of science. It is a staging of competent persons creatively measured, understand and manage forms, flexible and horizontal organizational structures which are based necessarily on the educational possibilities of communication and management of customized technological infrastructure that responds to the needs of the virtual education organization. Specifically, the virtual education model branding transversely determines the administration as to respond effectively to the challenge of ensuring the sustainability and equilibrium (Molina Restrepo, Jimenez Medina & Múnera Bureau, 2012) and fulfillment of the founding mission, with based on institutionalized processes, human talent experts, and the scope of the technology used.

This approach is consistent with boilers, Gonzalez de Celis, Barcia & Chacon (2010, p. 123) in arguing that the virtual enterprise demands major changes in the organizational context that claim to be made systematically, and further characterized and focused on the client, from the definition of value and technology integrator (Rojas, 2006, p. 136) that enables such virtual enterprise.

2. Manage the Unseen

The virtual workers cannot physically see those who are doing it gathered in one place, nor does it allow one to measure the amount of time they are present in a specific work site, wrote Jairo Jimenez Múnera (2005, p. 111), who exercised as to the date Chief Executive of the North Catholic University Foundation. This statement confirms the challenge of managing an organization of decentralized higher education in each workstation manager, administrator and teacher, who are in different geographic locations and contexts, but connected by the technologies used. He adds that Jimenez Múnera the characteristics of this institution motivated a series of questions to analyze any human, when sizing the implications of the administrative process applied to a virtual educational enterprise, these approaches and possible responses from experience are presented in the following Table 1:

Table 1   Approaches and Possible Responses from Experience

How do you measure the time working in the virtual?	• The virtual nature of the Northern Catholic University Foundation allows its teachers to be fully tele-workers, like 70 percent of employees with administrative functions. • It is not by meeting timetable requirements, but validated by the results of the projects undertaken and contained in the action plan address registered with the appropriate planning. • It adopts the principle of flexible working for employees, according to planning each agency and institution of the people who make up the teams. • It raises awareness and enables the employee and teacher at the effective time management, communication culture, appropriation and use of utilities, services and technology tools endowed by the institution.
How to supervise an employee who has no fixed schedule or date on the calendar?	• It has regulated and institutionalized an intranet as a disposal of institutional activity and action plans, reports, previews, results of projects that develop each area. Quarterly review of progress and achievements of the projects contained in the action plans in accordance with the targets. • Processes of horizontal communication among dependencies and individuals for collaborative and cooperative work. • Performance evaluation and improvement plan • Programs and strategies for welfare support designed to ensure satisfaction and quality of life of employees (telecommuters, teachers, administrators).

According to the above, the fact remains that the organization adopts and adapts the classic administrative process stages of Planning, Organization, Implementation, Coordination, Control and Evaluation in the virtual enterprise (Molina Restrepo, Jimenez Medina & Múnera Bureau, 2012). Experience has taught us to conclude that the administration as a science or art has universal principles adaptable to any company or institution. In addition to the above, the different management models—Strategic Management, Management by objectives, among others—are also adaptable to a virtual university type educational enterprise. It is therefore possible to demonstrate the achievement of mission objectives and ensure the sustainability and growth with any of these models without differentiating the effectiveness of either.

The planning phase is considered key in the virtual educational enterprise, because it claims anticipated and budgeted demand for services and products required by the university community in developing the substantive functions of teaching, research, extension and internationalization. Additionally, at this stage it is considered compliance and respect for education and business regulatory framework in Colombia, without flooding them or ignoring them, despite the natural gaps that still exist in these areas. In connection with the phase of organization is the immediate consequence of the virtual educational service planning and administrative institutions. The organization then takes the form of shares of enrollment and academic record, formalization of hiring teachers with the appropriate educational placement (teaching and research), and finally, access to training platform for students and teachers. According Múnera Jimenez (2005, p. 114) the organization also refers to the use of communication channels and loyalty technology infrastructure for educational and administrative management of the virtual educational organization, which also requires to quantified preferentially.

Phases of Implementation, Coordination, Control and Evaluation in the virtual enterprise are specified in the zeal to articulate the performance, developments, products and developments from all units in accordance with the Development Plan, strategic objectives and goals.

Central to the administration of virtual educational enterprise is the care required to manage financial resources just to ensure sustainability and breakeven (Molina Mesa Restrepo, Jimenez Medina & Munera, 2012) referred to above. No wonder Múnera Jimenez (2005, p. 117) stresses that.

The resources needed that develop a virtual educational enterprise are very significant at first, because the required equipment and software licenses are expensive, especially if it is gigantic in scope. On this basis, the

Northern Catholic University Foundation proposed vision and mission as a leader in virtual training, to carry and maintain eight higher education programs of undergraduate, specialization and virtual high school. This was (even still) a huge challenge that could not be paid by the university community or by the Diocese of Santa Rosa de Osos as a pioneer and patron of the project.

Who, then, could sponsor such a special and benign idea of a virtual university? There were two options: the state and private enterprise. At first, the Colombian government supported the idea through a grant, but it was the private company which continued to support this feat, and that the work is in place today, have been instrumental in the aid and grants from various institutions (... .)

But sustainability is not fully guaranteed even when it counts on reliable technology infrastructure, skilled human talent, and a portfolio of educational products and virtual services, because the natural dynamics of education in any country is that the retention of students is a five-year project. Additionally, it has the aspect of defection which also occurs in virtual education. So, decisions and strategies are required to contribute to enrich and update the portfolio of services and virtual product quality. From the experience of this institution will address the following strategies and lines of work:

- Strengthening of university extension through agreements and alliances with other universities or companies.
- Emphasis on quality and continuous improvement in the governance, performance and teaching staff, quality of virtual learning environments.
- Partnerships and programs with the state for education and training
- Programs with curricula containing courses and common areas.
- Training programs and tailored training and business needs.
- Applied research in different lines derived from virtual education.
- Design and production of digital content and virtual learning environments for training of different audiences.

In this section, we consider the differential educational materials for education and training and those for commercial demand (e-learning).

- Enrollment of students quarterly or permanently.
- Educational marketing strategies through various means.

2.1 Profile of Human Talent to Manage the Educational Enterprise Virtual

The profile, skills and abilities ideal of the administrator and other human talent that is now calling for a virtual university, begins with having people with an open mind (attitude) to labor from anywhere in the world based on ICT (computer and mobile devices with access internet) without attachment to bricks and cement offices. That is, people capable of working with the option of tele-working, which contribute to achieving corporate objectives (boilers, Gonzalez de Celis, Barcia & Chacon, 2010, p. 138).

In the administrative structure professionals who know very well the operation of educational enterprises are required, and preferably with appropriate experience as educators in various positions and at various levels of training (Table Molina Restrepo, Jimenez Medina & Munera, 2012). Additional capabilities, skills and abilities to be managers, in all matters concerning the systematization, information technology and the use of ICT, both corporately and in the educational training methods.

Therefore, the human talent required is an interdisciplinary team of people from their disciplines, knowledge and responsibilities that add value and build true virtual university daily. Required, and then is a list comprised of systems engineers, business administrators, teachers, education graduates, journalists, ICT experts, psychologists, social workers, among other disciplines.

In general, then presents the skills demanded and skills profile of the manager and employee of the virtual educational enterprise:

- Skills demonstrated in the use and appropriation of information and communication technologies.
- Be creative and proactive in adding value to individual performance.
- Work collaboratively and cooperatively with the (s) of person (s) dependence, or team assigned
- Communication skills (oral, scriptural) demonstrated to interact quickly, timely, efficient, and effective.
- Leadership skills in planning, development and evaluation.
- Ability to solve problems.
- Respect for intellectual property, copyright section.
- Ability to work in the workplace assigned by the institution or in the form of telework.

3. By Way of Conclusion: Lessons Learned, Challenges

This journey through the administrative experience of the virtual educational organization leaves the academic community and those interested in the topic, a set of reflections that the Northern Catholic University Foundation delivered as the transfer and social appropriation of knowledge. In this regard, a general outline of these reflections by way of conclusions:

3.1 Lessons Learned

- The virtual university is more accessible in the economic and logistical for the profile of young-adult student. Not so easy to finance as a company.
- Adoption of alternative employment such as teleworking given the nature of the virtual university, Case Foundation Catholic University of the North, the whole plant of teachers' works under this figure contract. Additional teleworkers are also 70 percent of the clerks or staggered days and times (twice a week move to the office).
- The virtual education model determines the administrative transversely as to respond effectively to the challenge of ensuring sustainability and balance point of the educational organization.
- The infrastructure and technological equipment is expensive and becomes obsolete in a short time, why it is essential to decide on a model (educational and administrative) to acquire the technology that best meets the needs identified.
- Modern management of virtual educational enterprise cannot be separated from a strategic marketing focus on the student and education and training needs for life and throughout life.
- The virtual university goes where the student lives and works nearby in context, therefore, the methodology avoids some displacement and migration to urban centers and large cities has the largest supply of education.
- The virtual university has to focus on their educational and administrative management that makes it viable and sustainable over time, so it is advisable to outsource the technology (platforms, data center, housing, servers, among other services).
- The virtual university is real, it is the university's present and future.
- The quality of training of the virtual university is similar to that offered by educational programs and services and distance learning methodologies.
- Training and continuous training of human talent in the organization to update or improve the skills and abilities (competencies) own topics of education and management of virtual educational organization.

- Desertion is the greatest enemy of development and maintenance of virtual educational organization.
- It is necessary that the curriculum of virtual education programs offered provide for common courses with the appropriate requirements and quality.
- The design and production of virtual learning materials are different when education and training purposes, that when the objective is commercial or business response type e-learning.
- The premise of quality has to be the strategic objective of the virtual university cross.

Research and apply or to update and innovate new ways and creating learning environments mediated by ICT.

The walls and columns of the virtual university are its virtual model, the processes of interaction between areas and community of scholars who make up the organization. All supported by a robust and reliable technology infrastructure that allows fully implement functions of teaching, research, extension/outreach and internationalization.

3.2 Challenges

- To change of culture and mentality of a broad academic and state that considers only the classroom agora of knowledge and methodology based on traditional transmission teacher-student. In short, break the paradigm of more than 2000 years classroom teaching and learning.
- A proper administration of virtual educational enterprise has to propose innovative and successful strategies in an effort to retain and engage the student and other human talent skilled in the necessities of virtuality.
- The virtual educational enterprise as the University of inclusion and opportunity for people with disabilities or living in places where traditional institutions fail for reasons of physical distance or because these contexts are not profitable for most of these institutions.
- Fully virtual university to form human beings that impact and solve problems in contexts where living and working nearby.
- The virtual university as a platform for training of human beings for inclusion in the so-called new economy characterized by technology and telecommunications art.

Literacy and the new "digital illiteracy" of this century according to the trends and convergence of digital and globalized world.

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