The UAB Virtual Campus: 
An Essential Platform for a European Higher Education Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The university is currently involved—within Europe—in a process of coordinating higher education for adaptation to the new ECTS European credits, which implies changing from a teacher-centred model (teacher conveys knowledge) to a learner-centred model, a real challenge. Since 1996, the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) has been carrying out the “Campus Virtual de la UAB” project. This platform fulfils several roles that aim at providing an answer to this challenge. This article will focus on how to use the communication and discussion functionalities between teachers and students, between students themselves, and on monitoring of the students’ learning process.

Keywords: collaborative learning; e-learning; EHEA (European Higher Education Area); student-centred learning; virtual campus

INTRODUCTION

Teaching research, innovation, and technological advances bring about changes and constant needs in the learning process. Society itself raises new training needs that imply new teaching-learning models. These models need to be adapted to the binomial time (synchronous/asynchronous) space (face-to-face/virtual).

The university is currently involved, within Europe, in a process of coordinating higher education (i.e., years of study, kinds of degrees, quality systems, more widely consensuated assessment criteria, and so on) alongside the adaptation to the new ECTS European credits, which implies changing from a teacher-centred model (teacher conveys knowledge) to a learner-centred model. In this model, the teacher’s tutorials, interrelation and communication between teacher and student, and between students themselves, have a fundamental role. The university should provide an answer to this challenge.

In this article we will present the UAB virtual campus as a platform that may contribute instruments to provide an answer to this challenge. We will focus especially on how teachers use
environments that promote tutorials, communication, and interaction between the teacher and students, and between students themselves, and monitoring of the students’ learning process.

The Campus Virtual
Since 1996, the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (UAB), having an interest in the application of information technologies in all academic fields, has promoted a bimodal teaching system by means of the creation of its Campus Virtual, which has developed remarkably in the 10 years since it started.

We define the bimodal model as a flexible educational model in which ICT resources and traditional training activities such as master classes or specific practical tasks, harmoniously combine with the aim of adapting education to target group needs and to the content to be learned. This model allows us to adapt the face-to-face/virtuality binomial to training needs. That is why we need to eliminate the limitations caused by the time/space coordinates, which may be liberated by the ICT. The bimodal model also promotes quality teaching design by making the most of teacher-student intercommunication possibilities and by giving greater relevance to individual tutorials, to student-student relationships, and to the interaction between students themselves by means of collaborative work, discussion, and contrasting ideas (Marques, 2005; Yabar & Barbara, 2000; Yabar & Barbara, 1999; Yabar, Barbara, Añaños, Recoder & Hernandez, 2001).

The virtual campus (Figure 1) is the tool that enables this bimodal model. This platform has several different roles:

• It provides support for face-to-face teaching, as we cannot forget that the UAB is a face-to-face university, by establishing channels of information, communication, and access to teaching materials online.
• It encourages teaching innovation as it offers/provides a set of possibilities that favour the interrelation between teacher and student, and between students themselves by means of the forum, group discussions, work submission, tutorials, and collaborative work.

Figure 1. UAB virtual campus