

# **Finding the balance: the University of Bologna E-Learning Centre strategy for lifelong learning in a complex environment**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to present the University of Bologna's E-Learning Centre strategy for quality e-learning courses production and delivery, with special regards to lifelong learning. The starting point was very complex since the University lacked a harmonised student approach, teaching styles, and so forth. The experimental phases of e-learning implied also the use of a number of different platforms. Since 2006 the Rector and the Academic Senate introduced a step by step strategy in order to harmonise projects, introduce quality technological and teaching guidelines, and improve lifelong learning offer. An E-Learning Centre was established and new regulations were approved for master degree courses, with reference to the e-learning utilization. Since 2007 the University of Bologna Strategic Plan has focussed on e-learning in the European context and strategic issues. Main issues include: a) delivery of blended learning courses in compliance with the University of Bologna information systems (authentication system, Academic Courses databases and so forth) b) keeping up with technological change such as LMSs and learners' technical access to the e-content c) developing partnerships and e-learning based joint international master degrees for lifelong learning with other European Universities and Institutions. The paper highlights some critical aspects and the first results of the E-Learning Centre activities.

**Keywords:** quality guidelines, Strategic Plan, Lifelong Learning, E-Learning Centre

## **Introduction**

Since 2003 the University of Bologna has started the transition from the second generation distance learning to the blended e-learning delivery; the same process has been carried out in most Italian Universities: the Italian Rectors' Conference (CRUI) supported the change with workshops and surveys<sup>1</sup>. Because of the University of Bologna 's complexity and size, the change has taken several years. In this paper we wish to highlight major improvements and critical aspects still to be overcome.

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<sup>1</sup> Indagine sull'e-learning nelle Università italiane. 2007. <http://www.fondazionecrui.it/e-learning/link/?ID=4362>

## **Setting up the E-Learning Centre**

The University of Bologna Senate approved the E-Learning Centre Statute on November 2005, and its bodies were appointed in Spring 2006. The aim of the Statute was mainly to bring the different e-learning initiatives within a unique framework of goals. In its early stages the Centre had therefore to coordinate three Laboratories: CITAM (the preexistent audiovisual media centre that developed a proprietary e-learning platform called AlmaChannel); the E-Learning Lab (this Laboratory was created before the E-Learning Centre and still provides technological services and guidance to the Romagna Campus Branches); and A<sup>3</sup> (this Laboratory develops the e-learning teaching materials of the Department of Computer Science Project for Accessible Computer Skills). Many other projects have been on the background of the Centre activities. Indeed, in those early years, the University of Bologna supported a number of e-learning initiatives with two calls for projects. In addition, the Emilia Romagna Region and some private firms financed a Region wide e-learning project called AlmaTwo. Finally, the initiatives of the two Language Centres – CILTA and CLIRO – providing e-learning languages courses have also to be considered.

Another important issue for the newly established E-Learning Centre was the management of three different e-learning platforms: ATutor, Moodle and AlmaChannel. The proliferation of locally developed software is common in other Italian Universities (such as the Politecnico di Milano, the University of Trento and some others) and is the consequence of the expensiveness of commercial platforms. Early adopters decided to build their own proprietary platforms, in order to scale costs.

The E-Learning Centre Board discussed the multi-platform approach in several meetings. Eventually the AlmaChannel platform has become a spinoff, and an agreement with the University of Bologna has been approved in order to manage the existing e-learning courses on this platform.

## **The University of Bologna Strategic Plan**

In 2007 the Rector and the University Bodies discussed and approved a Three Year Strategic Plan<sup>2</sup>. It is the first Strategic Plan ever adopted by the University even though there had always been general statements of goals and objectives in the past. Faculties, Research Experts and Executives were deeply involved in the Strategic Plan making. A chapter of the Plan is devoted to e-learning. The main strategic goal stated in the Plan regarding e-learning is the development of a University e-learning programme with the following specific objectives:

- adopt and disclose quality standards for e-learning courses
- integrate e-learning with the University information systems
- foster common projects at regional, national and international level
- collaborate with the Guidance Office to support Italian, Erasmus and Overseas students orientation.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unibo.it/Portale/Ateneo/Programmazione/pianostrategico.htm>

In March 2008 the Senate approved the technical and methodological guidelines for e-learning<sup>4</sup>, which give directions for the pedagogical aspects of the courses and indicate the main technical standards the courses should comply. Although the guidelines are at the moment just a list of requirements and some implied services are still to be set up (i.e. the repository, mandatory instructions for metadata and SCORM mandatory fields, etc.), they provide a clear statement of the roadmap.

The Senate also approved an experimental resolution which establishes an equivalence between online e-learning hours and in-presence lesson hours. Faculties are invited to indicate which courses deliver blended learning teaching.

### **Lifelong Learning Courses and e-learning**

In these last two years the organization of the University of Bologna Master courses and postlauream higher education courses has undergone a deep revision. New regulations has been adopted and a special agreement with the Fondazione Alma Mater<sup>5</sup> has been approved in order to support the professors of these courses to comply to regulations and provide the best organization for enrolment and marketing.

Some of these courses are international and/or provide a double qualification. One of the most important goals in the Strategic Plan is internationalisation. In this respect the University of Bologna provides full support to international students in the International Tutorial Center and dedicated services.

Since 2007, the regulations has recommended the professors of master and postlauream higher education courses to plan carefully the delivery of e-learning objects, providing an appropriate budget for this feature. The E-Learning Centre has to review the courses proposals, in order to improve the guidelines compliance.

Moreover the E-Learning Centre is responsible for organizing and providing training for e-learning tutors. This task is really strategic to insure an optimal use of the interactive and collaborative features of the e-learning platform. As the E-Learning Centre is very aware of this key issue, it has proposed the Foundation in charge for lifelong learning course tutor training (Fondazione Alma Mater) to offer specially designed courses for e-learning tutors, based on the content of the online courses themselves.

### **Critical issues**

In general, the most important issue in Italian Universities is related to the general budget: a recent decree<sup>6</sup> of the Berlusconi Government has set cuts (up to 20%) to the national funding for the next three years. These cuts are affecting the e-learning initiative as well, as most

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<sup>4</sup>

<http://www.eng.unibo.it/PortaleEn/University/University+Structures/Service+Structures/82139/guidelines.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.fondazionealmamater.unibo.it/FAM/default.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Decreto legge 25 giugno 2008 n.112 (Gazzetta Ufficiale n.147 del 25 giugno 2008)

Italian Universities are trying to move from pilot e-learning courses to a more diffuse and stable offer of blended courses. Another aspect is the presence of more than fifteen “online universities” which are offering full distance courses carried out by a few teachers who are not academic researchers: the online universities’ certificates are as valid and legal as the State Universities’ certificates – like the University of Bologna. This is an aspect of competition which affects the students choice.

Specific critical issues for the University of Bologna e-learning initiative should be mentioned.

### *Teaching methods*

Due to the high number of enrolled students at our University, face to face lessons are very often like conferences and little interaction is implied. Therefore e-learning is perceived by many Professors as more time and effort consuming, though more effective learning is achieved by students. The e-learning course delivery requires the tutors’ support. Because of financial constraints tutors may not be hired. In this way, not only a quality course production may be troublesome, but also its delivery.

### *Technological issues*

Many departments are still managing open source LMS on their own computers in order to keep under control their pilot courses. We counted more than sixteen different LMS (Moodle, Docebo, Claroline,...) hosted at the CeSIA computer Centre, besides the three main platform cited above.

Moreover, the upgrading and maintaining of three different LMS (Moodle, ATutor and AlmaChannel) is certainly expensive, as members of our Board has recently pointed out. The E-Learning Centre should therefore draw a strategy to converge toward a unique platform in order to better finalize upgrading and maintenance expenses, development budget and training courses for tutors.

### *IP issues*

We have found out that there is not a diffuse awareness about current legislation on Intellectual Property on teaching materials, learning objects and so on. Besides, texts and materials used for lessons may be published by third party Publishers without taking care of the rights of the University on them. The reuse of teaching materials within the University by other Professors is quite rare (but this is not a peculiarity of the University of Bologna). For these reasons a Working Group on IP issues in Learning Objects was set up with the aim to draft a policy proposal which has to be approved by the University Bodies.

## **Finding the balance**

The technical and methodological guidelines have the purpose to address these issues and provide service solutions, also in order to fulfil the Strategic Plan objectives. Therefore the guidelines requirements help the professors to focus on the methodological and pedagogical issues suggesting a frame where they can define the learning objectives and the general setting of the course. The E-Learning Centre plays a facilitator role, offering some authoring

tools with special templates to make the Learning Objects production done along the guidelines and make all the process more straightforward.

On the technological side, free hosting in the supported platforms is offered by CeSIA (University Computer Centre), which provides backup and disaster recovery services as well. The free and secure hosting should encourage the centralization but more information about the benefits has still to be disclosed. Moreover, the guidelines will offer full details about accessibility, SCORM compliance, available plug-ins and so forth: it would not be difficult to deliver online course in the due technological context. The Database of Academic Programmes ("Programmazione Didattica") already contains special fields for e-learning blended courses. A special initiative should be developed in order to integrate the LMS with the Directory Service at the University of Bologna: at the moment there is a certain level of integration, but it will be necessary to extract data about the courses and the classes as well in the near future.

There is a general agreement about the fact that **\*lifelong learning courses\*** (master courses and post lauream higher education courses) have to be the first to take care of, first because they are managed with special budgets and secondly because the adult learning is very well compliant with the e-learning modality (few participants, wide opportunities to apply a constructivist approach and so on). Moreover there is, as described above, a certain number of them that have an international/double certification format, and therefore they would represent an important area for our Academic Programmes presentation and quality.

On a organizational level, roles seem to be quite clear. The faculty is responsible for Learning Objects authoring, the Centre takes care of production, LMS management and technical arrangement. Moreover the Faculty/course provides the staff (tutors, adjunct teachers etc.) for the delivery and the interactive parts of the blended courses. This general model was also outlined in the E-Learning Centre's Statute.

But there is, also within our University, a lively debate about new ways to increase e-learning embedding within the courses, especially within lifelong learning courses and part-time students courses. We are taking in account the literature on this subject, and also the national situation. Particularly interesting, by our point of view, is the recent paper by David Morris (2008), about the economy of scale in e-learning. The discussion about part-time instructors/tutors/adjuncts (Ruth S.R. at al., 2007; Betts K.S. and Sikorski B., 2008) is also relevant for us.

We foresee to revise our business model quite soon - as requested by the Strategic Plan - taking in account the general situation of financial constraints. In fact there is not going to be any more special budget for the production of Learning Objects as in the past (calls for projects 2004-2005). Moreover it will be necessary to develop a strong initiative for the tutors/teachers training on the use of interactive features on the platform. Finally It will be mandatory a review of the existing courses/learning materials to evaluate their compliance to the guidelines, and their reuse.

## **Conclusions**

The E-Learning Centre Board and the staff are very much aware of the difficult times we have ahead. Luckily some Faculties have decided to put the e-learning courses as a strategic factor in their Academic Programmes, urging the Centre to give them immediate attention and services to fulfil a priority list. The activity with these Faculties will constitute an important case-study, taking into account the financial circumstances and the Faculties' real needs.

We are presently working to develop international contacts and relationships in order to participate to projects and benchmarking activities. We hope that the national and international context, and the case-study with Faculties will help us to define our business model, as a viable and effective support to e-learning courses adoption in our University.

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