



EDUCATION AND CULTURE

# LEONARDO DA VINCI

Second phase:2000-2006

## Project: «Title»

([www.nettskolen.com/in\\_english/megatrends](http://www.nettskolen.com/in_english/megatrends))

Survey for case studies in the Megatrends project

## Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

Facts about the institution

Name of institution	Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria
URL of institution	<a href="http://www.ulpgc.es">www.ulpgc.es</a>
Country	Spain
Levels in the education system	Higher education and vocational training
Interviewer	Pedro Fernández Michels
Interviewees	José Juan Castro Sánchez Vicerrector de Planificación y Calidad (Vice-president in planification and quality) Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria Tel. +34 928 451019/458010 Fax. +34 928 457276 <a href="http://www.ulpgc.es">www.ulpgc.es</a>

### Introduction

The Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, one of Spain's 48 public universities, started up in 1989-1990 as a consequence of a big social movement that happened in Gran Canaria Island claiming a reorganization of the academic structure on the islands in order to improve access to higher education. This movement finished when the Canarian Parliament passed the "Ley de Reorganización Universitaria de Canarias" (University Reorganization Law of the Canary Islands) on April, 26th 1989.

The application of the mentioned law not only created the ULPGC, whose rectorate is located in Gran Canaria, but it also meant the integration of the Polytechnic University of the Canary Islands and the redistribution of the university centres existing at that moment in the archipelago.

Online education in the ULPGC rose to a higher level in the academic year 2001-2002 when the institution offered its first full online degree. Since then online course provision has grown and become an important factor in the university's academic program.



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### **Contextual factors concerning online education in Spain**

The ULPGC is located in a geographically difficult area. Providing studies and training to a target group that is distributed over several islands is certainly a challenge due to the reduced mobility of the people. In the ULPGC, distance education is seen as a solution to this problem, apart from being a possibility of widening the caption area towards other regions like Africa, America and the rest of Spain and Europe.

There currently exist 70 universities in Spain, 48 of which are public. The total number of registered students in Spanish universities for the academic year 2004/05 was 1.535.626.

The results of the European e-user-Project<sup>1</sup> describe the diffusion of ICT in Spain unsatisfactory due to the low penetration of Internet in the households in comparison to the other EU members which could be related to the high prices of Internet connection.

Broadband diffusion, however, has been comparatively fast in the last three years, in particular in the more developed and urban parts of the country such as Catalonia and Madrid.

The same study reports considerably big disparities in access to and use of the Internet between sub-segments of the population e.g. genders, age groups, socio-economic groups etc.

The acceptance of e-learning within university students can be considered as relatively high. In spite of the lack of diffusion of ICTs and the disparities mentioned above, the large number of e-learning initiatives in Spanish universities indicates a satisfactory level of acceptance of the use of ICT in teaching and learning among the academic community.

It can be assumed that digital literacy in the target group is relatively high. Spanish university students and teachers use computers and the Internet on a regular basis. However the percentage of the total number of Spanish people aged 16 to 74 that do not use the computer or the Internet is slightly higher than the same figure for the UE-25.<sup>2</sup>

Neither the central government nor the regional administrations are carrying out a specific policy in order to promoting e-learning. The projects that are being undertaken are more generic and only have an indirect effect on the development of e-learning. Examples are the provision of equipments and access to ICT for schools, the development of Internet courses and training, the support of innovation and development in educational applications of ICT, the cooperation between Latin America and Europe in the area of ICT in education, projects supported by the government through the European Social Fund and through the Spanish Continuing Training Foundation FORCEM, the promotion of ICTs in enterprises that offer e-learning courses through FORINTEL (a program created by the Ministry of Industry,

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<sup>1</sup> [www.euser-eu.org](http://www.euser-eu.org)

<sup>2</sup> DEMUNTER, Christophe (2006): "How skilled are Europeans in using computers and the Internet?" [Online article]. In: *Statistics on focus. Industry, trade and services* 17/2006. (Data retrieved on 30/10/2006). URL: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-NP-06-017/EN/KS-NP-06-017-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-NP-06-017/EN/KS-NP-06-017-EN.PDF)



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Tourism and Commerce) or the “Plan España.es” that promotes accessibility to training and digital contents.

### **Historical context**

The promoters of the elearning initiative counted with a good initial situation to implement online teaching and learning. Some of the important pillars the current situation is based on are the following:

- the existence of a Innovation Centre for the Information Society that introduced and translated WebCT when a large number of universities still did not know this platform
- the experience of having been offering some courses and postgraduate programmes through this platform for several years
- the fact of being very much involved in ICT as a university
- the high ratio PC/student
- the early provision of course programmes and some contents on the Internet
- the early possibility of online enrolment
- assessment management over the Internet
- online information about each student’s academic file etc.

The whole virtualization process is based on a step by step program established previously in the institutions strategic plan 2002-2006. In this sense we are looking at a top-down model that follows strategic decisions taken on a high level. The stated objective of promoting the online campus for the development of the academic studies is carried out following several strategies that trigger concrete actions. An example of a strategy is:

- To enlarge the provision of official studies by distance education in order to ease the access to higher education studies to those that can not assist regularly to face to face courses in the university.

Two concrete actions triggered by this strategy would be:

- To establish common actions with national and foreign organisations in order to offer online or blended degrees and courses and
- to update the university’s provision of distance education working on already existing f2f degrees as well as on new degrees and postgraduate degrees previously carrying out the necessary evaluation of feasibility.

Another important factor that characterizes the development of online education in the ULPGC is that courses, contents, methods and teachers are subject to evaluation in order to guarantee the quality of teaching.

Every year workshops are held in which debate and present the latest experiences are presented and debated, as well as meetings where each course and the impact of the improvements that have been undertaken is evaluated. At the same time the participation in national and international congresses can be mentioned as opportunities to analyze the institution’s model.



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The courses and the applied innovations are subject to evaluation through surveys carried out among teachers and students. The results of these surveys are published.

### **Technical issues**

The ULPGC's learning platform is based on MOODLE, a free license platform that can be used without major equipment. The only tools needed are a basic computer and an Internet connexion.

The university's administrative routines like enrolment, grade management, information about programmes, contents, academic portfolios etc. are done or accessible online, provided by the university's own systems.

These systems had been developed for on campus students even before the institution started its e-learning project, which meant a real step forward and the creation of a good base regarding the requisites of the future, now present, distance education and administration. E-administration is, therefore, a consolidated part in the organization. More than 99% of on campus students enrol themselves over the Internet. The rest of routines, for example the applications for the homologation of credits in open configuration contexts are more and more done via Internet.

Competence in information technology is very high. The institution can count on a team of technicians specialized on the university's own technical developments. At the same time ULPGC has created an own enterprise "ULPGC-TIC" (ULPGC-ICT) that has started receiving contracts for external developments.

Regarding technological development, resources and implementation, the ULPGC holds a position comparable to the rest of the country's universities.

### **Courses**

The courses provided by the ULPGC cover a wide range of subjects and academic contexts, from graduate studies to continuing training for the staff, all including courses for open study configuration, own degrees in the field of graduate, postgraduate and doctorate programmes, academic extension courses (vocational) and lifelong learning. Over 50% of the postgraduate and continuing training programmes are online.

Although the ULPGC considers all subjects potentially "onlineable", the focus lies on those studies and types of knowledge that are especially liable to being transmitted and acquired online. These are basically studies related to social sciences, business, law and education. To a lower extend one can find biomedical sciences and technical courses in the context of graduate programmes, but these reappear in the context of postgraduates.



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Nearly all the courses have fixed start-up and progression in accordance with the f2f programmes.

Most communication is asynchronous. Synchronous communication is optional and has more of a social function rather than an academic one. Only the language courses where teacher and students have to speak and see each other, synchronous communication is required at some moments.

### **Management, strategy and attitudes**

The involvement of management in e-learning is complete and reflected as such in the different strategic plans. It is entirely conducted by the highest institution and is not an experimental situation created by a group of interested teachers.

Attitudes are very much in favour of distance education. The majority of the teaching staff (800 out of 1500) actively uses the same platform (MOODLE) in order to enhance their f2f lessons.

The strategy of online education in the ULPGC is defined by the institution's strategic plan 2002-2006. The main objective in the field of teaching is:

*To enhance the use of the ULPGC's Virtual Campus in order to develop the academic teaching processes fomenting an open and flexible pedagogical model that combines the intensive use of ICT with face to face assistance.*

In order to develop it, this objective is transformed into concrete actions. The following table shows the strategies and the actions that are related to the *Estructura de Teleformación ULPGC (Distance Education Structure ULPGC)*. Examples for concrete actions under the stated objectives are:

- To offer the complete degree in psycho-pedagogical studies online, progressively incorporating both of its courses into the online context.
- To constitute a unit responsible for the implantation and maintenance of the technical systems on which the ULPGC's distance education is based.
- To establish common actions with national and foreign organisations in order to offer online or blended degrees and courses.
- To update the university's provision of distance education working on already existing f2f degrees as well as on new degrees and postgraduate degrees previously carrying out the necessary evaluation of feasibility.
- To negotiate the contracts with the local public administration in order to create multimedia rooms that support distance teaching and learning.

Another important focus is continuing training in order to present online learning as a possibility of effective preparation for the labour market. This led to the creation of the ULPGC's Centre for Continuing Training, and to an impulse of the training activities that cover the needs of different sectors and social groups.



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All courses offered through our distance education programmes include materials that have been produced previously following a special guideline to guarantee a recognizable layout. These course materials are the base of the programmes and without them it is not possible to start the course. In the past years, counting only the graduate studies, over 100 handbooks were designed and edited, one for each course. These handbooks are also used by students that are enrolled in f2f courses.

Teachers are not obliged to work in distance learning. If they do so, they get an economical compensation.

The ULPGC belongs to the national association of universities that use MOODLE through which it keeps lively contact with other institutions.

The Canarian university system has not yet taken a clear decision in favour of online education. Our university had to charge all the costs on the students and we did not receive any additional financial support for off campus education. The support by government and public administration has therefore not been essential for success.

The teaching platform based on MOODLE, our own developments in e-administration and the powerful ICT service of our institution makes it relatively easy to manage large numbers of students. All this and the strong demand for off campus education in an intermittent territory and the strong institutional support given by management practically guarantee a successful result.

## **Economy**

Although the ULPGC is a public university, the price for distance education runs on a private basis. This means that the student pays 100% of the costs. It is essential to avoid losses and the prices cover or are slightly above the costs. This cost-effectiveness allowed the institution to accept new challenges every academic year. Income is stable and predictable because every year the number of students grows while the costs for material production, for example does not grow.

It is true that the institution experience certain pressure to adapt to a market that is in constant development. There is a constant effort in order to fulfil these requirements and a prove for this is actually our effort in online education as a response to real needs, as for example the claims for better access to the university for the inhabitants of the peripheral islands that do not have an own campus, expressed by the representatives of the smaller islands of our archipelago who are members of our Social Council.

In the same way, the postgraduate studies, including the off campus branch, changes every year according to an evolving market. The postgraduate programmes have to be financed by external income and if that's not possible or cost-effective, the programmes do not take place. This means that the "market" decides which courses are going to be carried out at the end.



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As a public entity the ULPGC is not entitled to contract personnel. It relies on its teaching staff but only on those who are prepared to accept the requirements of distance education. At the same time incentives for this kind of work are offered.

### **Conclusions**

These factors are seen as vital for the ULPGC's success as a mega provider of online education:

- Being a young university created on a strong social demand.
- Institutional support and planning based on a top-down approach.
- Early experiences with online learning platforms and an early set-up of e-administration tools and procedures.
- High competence in technical issues.
- The need to reach the level of the more veteran universities as quickly as possible.
- The opportunity of not having to make the same mistakes as the other ones.
- The fact of not being tied to a consolidated team.
- The fact of being located in an intermittent territory (islands) with the need of distance education.