

Expanding Areas of Influence at Azores University: Virtual Campus, Regional Clusters and Points of Presence

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Abstract

The tripolarity of the University of the Azores, characterised by three campuses and facilities has been shown to be economically unviable, socially unjust and at the same time insufficient to allow the attendance of all nine islands of the archipelago. The location in an outermost region of the European Union does not guarantee a positive discrimination. The solution might lie in a paradigm shift, based on a decapolar structure and through partnerships establish regional clusters, points of presence and a virtual campus.

Keywords: regional clusters; points of presence; paradigm shifts; virtual campus.

Introduction

The University of the Azores (UAC) is a Portuguese public institution, created within the framework of regionalization of higher education.

It is important to bear in mind that the issue of insularity in the region involves specific solutions that fit to the geographical, economic and social realities of the Azores archipelago, located in the middle of the northern hemisphere of the Atlantic Ocean.

The issue of insularity provides a tripolar character to the region, with poles in the cities of Ponta Delgada, Angra do Heroísmo and Horta, which gave rise to the present Azorean campuses.

In this paper I focus on analyzing the tripolar physical campus model used by UAC, analyze similar institutions and propose a new model of expansion, based on regional clusters, points of presence and a virtual campus.

The paper draws on findings from the research “Implementation Strategies and Development of an Open and Distance Education System for the University of the Azores” (Roth, 2013), funded by the European Social Fund. The main objective of this research was to observe the recent events related to likely paradigm shift in the educational area and propose to UAC the adoption of solutions that can, at the same time, correct implementations already carried out in previous experiments and respond to these new challenges.

After 36 years since its creation, the University continues to face challenges, particularly arising from the inexorable process of globalization – phenomenon started in the 15th century with the era of Portuguese discoveries, of the knowledge-based society and the policy effects of chronic underfunding of public higher education in Portugal.

However, as we'll see, UAC has been unable to serve the entire archipelago with the structure defined in 1976. This concept is being questioned today. The latest concern is with old theories about the functioning and costs of the tripolar infrastructure. There are those who are once again defending the centralization of UAC on a single island, claiming that the three infrastructures is that it hinders the financial management of the academy (Lima, 2012).

Would it be a priority to invest in education in times of crisis?

Probably not...

Would it be possible to have more and better education for all, without further costs?

Certainly...

Referring to Portugal, Crato (2012) says that: “the greatest debt that a country can generate is the perpetuation of ignorance”. However Morgado (2011), previously in a self-criticism, recognizes the difficulties faced in the country: “think and talk is easy. But roll up their sleeves and put hands to work is something else. We are a speaking society”.

The analysis shows that the current structure does not serve physically the whole archipelago forcing the movement of students and professors (Roth, 2013). In addition, it is impossible (in the current model), to have the pretension to meet the natural demands (geographical vocation), services, industry, interests (public and private) and personal choices of each citizen who does not need to be limited to any demands, initiatives and existing course offerings locally and always will determine the movement or to another island, or to the mainland or overseas, often a path without return – many azoreans are going to study elsewhere and they do not come back to the Azores (exodus). However, this can be bypassed.

Nowadays, it is possible to offer the “world” – without the need to leave home, city, island or region – through partnerships and agreements with other national and international institutions to offer and develop different kinds of courses, targeting to specific needs, enabling multiple certifications and joint development.

In recent years UAC has missed the train in relation to various demands, and that applies in relation to e-learning, the lack of struggle against resistance of professors in the use of technology; the lack of attention to migratory diversity of the Azores, the lack of support to students in mobility; the lack of approximation of departments – that can be considered watertight areas that hardly communicate with each other, compete among themselves and hardly collaborate on joint projects; the failure to reply to the invitation to participate at OpenCourseWare (OCW) Universia and the non-participation in calls that could improve their infrastructure, reducing the effects of insularity, effective presence in all the islands, reduction of maintenance costs, increased visibility, external projection and internationalization by finding new customers outside its surroundings (Roth, 2013).

Cabral (2012) points out the future challenges, doubts and related issues that the azoreans themselves also seem to have doubts: “...our academy will also have to make an effort to restructure and adapt to the new reality of these times”. “...it is necessary that the university engage more with the society, in order we realised and be involved in supporting its operation. The university should clarify, to all of taxpayers, which is the strategy it intends to take for their survival, and how to solve numerous problems of management, exploitation and investments; for which we keep hearing questions and major concerns”.

Medeiros (2013) recognizes these difficulties, stressing that “the University of the Azores to become a true university of the 21st century would have to innovate and transform themselves in order to follow these new concepts introduced by the Europe 2020 strategy. These concepts will require a new dynamic only possible by introducing new mobilizing structures, new working methods, new ways of dealing with the community, new strategies in the fields of scientific production, new capabilities to mobilize other audiences, new axes for social and technological transformation and new ideas to intervene in society that continues to see the university as the main promoter of qualification, innovation and creativity”.

Several Portuguese universities are betting on their own projects. Moreover, we cannot deny the role of the universities of Aveiro and Minho which are among the most technological universities of the country.

<http://www.ua.pt/>
<http://www.uminho.pt/>

The pursuit of national references to support the implementation of projects mediated by technologies usually refers to the Portuguese Open University (UAb), a distance education public university, created in 1988.

<http://www.uab.pt/>

This connection cannot be neglected, however UAb have not innovated in any aspect and was fully based on the Spanish congener National University of Distance Education (UNED). Ever since April 2008 there has been extensive cooperation through a collaboration agreement for the establishment of forms of cooperation regarding innovation in distance education; as well as the creation of joint academic activities in various scientific fields (Activities Report, 2008).

<http://www.uned.es/>

Apparently, UAb (2008) has opted to follow completely this model rather than adopt the updated format used by the also Spanish, Open University of Catalonia (UOC) where the whole process, including assessments, can be performed by distance. To wit, UAb migrated from previous pedagogical model (correspondence courses via post system) in the same way as UNED and holds the same aftereffects, unlike UOC which, since its creation, adopted the technologies. The greatest implication of these sequels refers to assessments and examinations that still take place through in-person tests, although there are safe technologies to make it totally by distance – as does UOC (Roth, 2007).

<http://www.uoc.edu/>

As a consequence, the model adopted in Portugal is not open, and cannot even be fully applied at distance, which contradicts UAb motto: “Portuguese Open University – Anywhere in the World”, since it is not possible to make and complete a course from anywhere or even totally at distance.

In this sense the model of UAb, without adaptations, is not best suited to the Azores region, since it does not eliminate totally the displacements of students and/or professors.

Currently it is possible to safely apply distance evaluations through various systems including video or not. Properly used – as a means and not as an end in itself – technologies do not become a problem for evaluations. But evolution does not necessarily passes through the technology, but by production of better quality assessment systems, customised, that is not reproduced and applied to the same group of students, or worse, maintained year after year without substantial changes, as if the knowledge did not evolve over time or even if the evaluators did not update their skills over time. Demonstrating interest in developing an updated assessment is in line with the development of the current education – not just technologically – and is part of the work of a professor in the same way as updating a particular discipline (all semesters) and the relevant bibliography (Roth, 2013).

The creation of different problems and situations unique to each student inhibits a behavior that has been verified also in other groups, trying to replicate the answers given by others. Moreover, the freedom to use all possibilities available – including the internet – such as it occurs in real life, comes not only to meet new needs (problem-solving) as it reproduces our normal behavior of using all possible means to find a solution.

The present-day needs are no longer focused on the accumulation of knowledge, that is, memorization of contents is no longer important. The focus should be in the ability to solve problems. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is a student-centered pedagogy in which students solve problems collaboratively and reflect on their experiences.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem-based_learning

The challenge for universities with classrooms everywhere is more educational than technological, because pedagogy remains focused on traditional instructive proposals, not to mention that resists becoming technologically sound (Evans, 2001; Stoll, 2000).

The fact that UAC has not yet found its best way or even is not considered to be the first domestic university to explore the technologies must be seen as an asset: not to repeat the mistakes of other universities – applying the premise attributed to Otto von Bismarck (Gale & Buzzell, 1989). Similarly, one of the main goals of studying history is not to repeat the mistakes of the past. If the institutions do not learn from the mistakes of the congeners, how can they avoid them in the future?

To meet the whole the Azorean archipelago, UAC has to adapt to the effective use of technologies. However, replicating the UAb model does not mean any innovation, but would only replicate the outdated model of UNED with all its sequels. Before that, adopt the model of the UOC, or better still, evaluate all existing models and extract the best that we can do with the different technologies, not necessarily inventing or developing something new, but using everything that already exists, often free of charge and developed by others.

Rodrigues (2012) launched an appeal: the University has to be of the Azores and not only of the three islands. He spoke in the sense that UAC should be present on every island, somehow (physical, blended or virtual learning). Perhaps it is time to talk about it...

The lack of attention and sensitivity to regional demands, which does not always mean additional costs – on the contrary, could mean additional revenues – have been represented by a long process of internal disinterest of professors in adopting effective technologies in supporting their educative actions, misguided collaboration protocols, lack of interest in attending all islands and the opening up of spaces so that the counterparts occupy the unwanted space (Roth, 2013).

On 14 December 2010, UAb (2010) and UAC signed a cooperation protocol. It is inevitable that the prospects of achieving this bear hug on a regional scale will lead to a stage of profound risk aversion, low investment and unemployment. And as we can see, this situation is already reflected: Portuguese Open University opens Learning Center in Terceira Island (Lusa News Agency, 2008).

Without claiming to want to turn UAC on a distance university, in many aspects it must adapt and act as such, mainly due to the need to meet its target area, an archipelago composed of nine scattered islands.

The lack of a specific national legislation, at the same time allowing a high autonomy and flexibility, ends up causing the lack of standards. And at some point they will have to be established in order for accreditation and audit by the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES).

<http://www.a3es.pt/>

In terms of performance, UAC should already long ago have evolved the model (inefficient, inadequate, insufficient and unsustainable) of three infrastructures, for points of presence in all the islands (the 9 islands), more than one point on each island, depending on the settlements. In other words, evolve towards the direction of flexibility, through various forms of presence and performance not only in three contact points but in numerous other places.

The costs of building and maintaining these traditional physical campuses make any speech of expansion inviable, considering the economic times and the current situation - the European debt crisis, the Portuguese economic crisis, the chronic underfunding of education by the Portuguese state and the economic situation of UAC. But it is not impossible. It is simply necessary to change the focus, the means and ways. If it is not done now, another train will pass. And this one will certainly not come back.

Roth (2013) argues that the best cost-benefit option is based on the deployment of a decapolar structure (UAC10X), combining a fully virtual campus with nine physical structures – regional clusters in the whole islands with points of presence (POPs) in various places of each island that can be associated with existing ICT facilities.

How is this to be accomplished?

Some previous experiences of UAC itself have shown the way, but they did not follow ahead. People who do not want things to change are those that, for some reason, feel they have a disadvantage with the change.

Probably effective changes will only be observed through mechanisms of pressure, derived from the current situation where crisis, reduce costs and budget constraints have become watchwords.

In the same way that UAb did not use financial resources from its own budget to establish itself and maintain in the Azores, UAC can do the same to expand its presence in its main area of operation before others do...

In addition to its headquarters in Lisbon, UAb has delegations in the cities of Porto and Coimbra and, in partnership with civil society and local, has been creating a network of small units, devoted not only for learning support known as Local Learning Centers (CLAs).

<http://www.uab.pt/web/guest/organizacao/servicos/servicos-desconcentrados/cla>

The CLA Ribeira Grande (São Miguel Island, Azores) is a partnership between the Portuguese Open University and the Municipality of Ribeira Grande.

<http://www.uab.pt/web/guest/organizacao/servicos/servicos-desconcentrados/cla/ribeira-grande>

The CLA Praia da Vitoria (Terceira Island, Azores) is a partnership between the Portuguese Open University and the Municipality of Praia da Vitoria.

<http://www.uab.pt/web/guest/organizacao/servicos/servicos-desconcentrados/cla/prai-da-vitoria>

The first UAb partnership with municipalities, for the establishment of CLAs, was with the municipality of Praia da Vitoria, having been progressively widening the network of CLAs the whole country, favoring inland counties without higher education offer.

Roberto Monteiro, who spoke at a press conference (Lusa News Agency, 2008), said that “one of the axes of the county development will only be sustainable if based on professional development and human resources skills”. The project with UAb, aims to “educational development, training and technology” in a mode using “the new generation of distance learning”. The praiense municipality is responsible for providing and maintenance of the facilities, as well as financing of equipment, while UAb is responsible for service of exams, salary of center coordinator and promotion of courses. UAb will provide short courses and disciplines to complement and professional valuation, as well as undergraduate courses, masters and doctorates.

The former rector of UAb, Carlos Reis, stressed that this partnership, “the first in this new format” matches “strategic priorities” of the institution. These priorities are “collaboration and openness to civil society, cooperation with partners that have similar concerns and the technical and pedagogical innovation”. This new teaching mode “responds perfectly to the institutional vocation” of the university, that has a pedagogic provision for qualification and re-qualification of human resources in the active. Domingos Monteiro, former pro-rector, revealed that “all the educational offer is in accordance with the restructuring required by the Bologna Process” and of distance learning, which “included the new information and communication technologies, as well as personalized assistance to students”. “Will be made available over three hundred disciplines that can be attended individually, in short courses, specifically created according to the needs of students and the municipality of Praia da Vitoria”.

In 2008, UAb had about 10 thousand students, of whom two thousand in Africa and more than 300 in the Azores (Lusa News Agency, 2008).

Rocha (2016) demonstrates that there are increasingly more students are opting for university education in the distance and the Portuguese Open University is increasingly sought after in the Azores.

The site of the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities presents current data (2017):

UAC: 4179 students, 258 professors

<http://www.crup.pt/universidade-dos-acoeres/>

UAb: 12085 students, 155 professors

<http://www.crup.pt/universidade-aberta/>

The last annual report (UAC, 2016, page 22) shows that the number of new students (enrolled for the first time) continues to decline: 2011/2012 (954), 2012/2013 (811), 2013/2014 (741), 2014/2015 (724) and 2015/2016 (672).

I conclude by suggesting that the solution to UAC passes through the establishment of regional clusters and points of presence, without the use of financial resources from its own budget, through partnerships and agreements with existing schools, municipalities, regional government and public and private companies.

The project should start by building a structure that allows the realization of studies, trials and investigations related to the development of technology-mediated education through creative and innovative approaches to teaching and learning. It involves promoting training sessions and support directed to departments, covering a set of varied themes on the various existing solutions and didactically validated at trial groups. Seeking, this way, a professional and organizational evolution to obtain a more effective education, through the creation of a dynamic research, development and resource center that carries out the exploration, testing, disclosure, dissemination, socialization and contribution to the development of this area of knowledge, through active participation in actions and collaborations at local, regional, national and international.

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