

VISCED-20: Best practice from virtual schools to use for taking place-based schools online – in a resilient fashion

From 1 June 2020 the Dualversity team have been working on a short project VISCED-20 (June-September 2020), a pilot for a proposed longer study, but one which aims in this phase to provide useful information to schools, policy experts and ministries across Europe trying to cope with the situation of whole or partial school closure and online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. In some countries, Covid-19 is very likely to affect next school year also, for example reducing the choice in the curriculum due to classroom constraints and fewer staff. Moreover, pandemics can recur, not to mention other natural disasters – countries have learned the hard way that we need to be better prepared.

While by and large universities have coped, via rapid moves to “emergency online teaching”, the situation with schools has seemed to be less satisfactory, with some noteworthy exceptions. More generally, progress over the last ten years in systematic use of ICT in schools seems to be modest compared with the expectations of ministries and experts in 2010.

Our study has four Pillars.

Pillar I. (Led by Charlotte Doody (surveys) and Paul Bacsich (interviews).) A set of questions, to virtual schools, based on the situation described 9 years ago in a series of VISCED reports for the European Commission:

1. What is your view of the current state of ICT in school education in your country? In particular did place-based schools have in your view ICT too limited in scope and scale to cope with the needed rapid move to bring about fully online learning? What successes can you point to?
2. What influence on national education policy, in normal circumstances, has your virtual school had in your country? And what influence at multinational level (such as EU)?
3. To what extent has there been transfer of techno-pedagogic knowledge from your virtual school to face-to-face schools? And what in your view could be transferred to them? and from their “emergency teaching” online practice to your practice?

4. To what extent is your virtual school active in the main national and international (e.g. EU) Associations that focus on ICT and that place-based schools belong to, and what influence have you had?

To which we add some questions raised specifically by the current emergency:

5. To what extent has your virtual school been involved in implementing resilient solutions alone or in partnership with place-based schools¹ during the Covid-19 emergency?
6. What is your recommendation as to what should happen better in your country with resilience in the next emergency? What role would you see for a National Learning Resilience Network in your country, region or language group (see definition later in this document) and what do you see your school's role in it?

Pillar II. (Led by Michelle Selinger.) A variant of these questions will be asked to a selection of place-based schools (both public-sector and privately run) which were fortunate enough to have already made heavy use of ICT to provide blended learning.²

Pillar III. (Led by Sarah Porter.) Interviews with university-level e-learning experts on the applicability of university online learning approaches to schools (especially senior secondary schools).

Pillar IV. (Led by Paul Bacsich.) Discussions with key vendors of systems (VLE/LMS) that support virtual schools and large-scale blended learning in place-based schools.

Since VISCED-20 is a European-focussed project (in this pilot phase) it will also look at the value of setting up a European Network of Virtual Schools to be an advisory body to government departments and international agencies on matters of online learning in schools.

We know that there are many virtual schools contacts and relevant pedagogic experts among our colleagues' LinkedIn contacts. The project is

¹ Such as in New Zealand and British Columbia

² Such as Harrow School Online, <https://www.harrowschoolonline.org/>

running in an agile fashion so hypotheses, tools, contacts and reports are likely to change rapidly. So we would like to hear from you now – you do not need to wait for us to reach out. This is especially because of the different patterns of school summer holidays across Europe.

The project will look particularly what features future solutions to provide greater resilience in emergency situations should have, drawing on good practice from territories such as New Zealand, British Columbia or Scotland’s Highlands and Islands.³ We call such approaches National Learning Resilience Networks (NLRN).

An NLRN is in some ways similar to the Learning Networks typical of various nations, regions and municipalities in the past, but with the additional capability to “surge-scale” systems *and trained people*⁴ to deliver and support online learning by students during periods of enforced closures of all or some schools in the relevant region. We interpret “national” loosely to include municipality, region, nation or group of nations/regions (e.g. EU, Canada, West Indies, Germany, etc) grouped by geography or language.

³ See <http://www.sides.ca/en/SIDES-BC-Brightspace-D2L-Courses.html> and <http://www.e-sgoil.com/media/1283/e-sgoil-and-scholar-brochure-version-3.pdf>

⁴ E.g. drawing on a “teaching reserve” of retired school teachers and the networks of tutors with relevant skill at open universities and similar online providers