

# Conditions for a Sustainable Online Master at CERAP

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## Abstract

*This article describes the recent story of the online Master Program in Peace and Conflict Studies of CERAP. Highlighting the necessary conditions for the development and sustainability of e-learning at CERAP. My goal is to share my own experience as e-learning coordinator in order to improve and to make e-learning at CERAP effective and sustainable.*

## 1. Introduction

The Center for Research and Action for Peace (CERAP) in Abidjan ( Ivory Coast) had officially joined the world of e-learning in January 2012 by offering a Master Program in Peace and Conflict. The idea of this Master Program is simple: to offer an education of quality from Africa to all. After one year, what have I learned from this pilot project as CERAP e-learning coordinator?

First, in a continent like Africa where universities belong to the state and where tuition fees are low, e-learning will reach a small number of students (wealthier). Why? Because students need to have frequent and reliable internet and email access to take the course. In addition, there is evidence that this type of training is ideal for motivated learners, who are able to self-manage.

Second, I have the firm conviction that a university does not offer an online quality course simply because it wants to . In other words, there are differences between teaching in classroom and online teaching.

Third, CERAP has announced plans to explore the e-learning to increase its visibility and find new teaching technologies. Such an undertaking cannot be sustained without certain conditions. What are these conditions? This is the subject of this paper.

This paper will be in three parts. The first one will focus on CERAP Highlights Timeline, the second will focus on the online Master, the third part will point out some conditions to make e-learning at CERAP sustainable.

## 2. CERAP Highlights Timeline

**1962** CERAP, then known as INADES (Institut Africain pour le Developpement economique et Social a Jesuit social center) was founded in Abidjan.

**1964** The Library was founded. Today it is one of the largest among French speaking countries' libraries which are exclusively devoted to social sciences in Africa. The main

catalog covers all the social sciences; collections are particularly strong in economics, sociology, political science and the social, economic and international aspects of history, etc. The library is more than just a collection of books and journals; it is an ideal place to study with hundreds of study spaces and PC's, laptop points, a free laptop loan service, wireless access, group study rooms and photocopying and printing facilities. The library is a focal point at the school and used extensively by both students and academics.

**2003** INADES became CERAP

**2005** CERAP received accreditation from the Ivory Coast government to become an Institute for Higher Education.

CERAP is a Catholic Higher Education center sponsored by the Society of Jesus. As such, CERAP is dedicated to the ideals of striving for academic excellence under the inspiration of the Christian faith; it recognizes and affirms the importance of the principle of academic freedom in its pursuit of truth and in keeping with its Christian vision of the dignity of each human person. It welcomes and respects students, faculty, and staff from all racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds and beliefs.

**From 2005 to now:** CERAP offers a two - year Master Program in Ethics and Governance. The program has four specializations:

- International Human Rights Law,
- Ethics in Economy and Sustainable Development,
- Corporate Governance and Corporate Social Responsibility,
- Peace and Conflict Management.

The program prepares graduates for a professional career as an investigator and analyst in both the private and public sectors, both nationally and internationally. The degree is a required qualification to apply for doctoral studies in the selected specialization.

**2012:** Since January 2012 CERAP offers an online Master Program. It is taught in French

### **3. Overview of the online master program: how does this online course work?**

The Master Program in Peace and Conflict Studies is a degree program that typically includes 25 students from more than 10 countries in Africa. The 15-month program includes core courses, optional courses, professionalizing activities, and the writing of a Master paper. The degree is assessed through coursework, examinations and a dissertation. It is designed in particular for professionals who wish to pursue advanced studies in Peace and Conflict Studies but may need to do so alongside their work or family responsibilities. It involves one period of internet learning as well as one session (residential) held at CERAP (Abidjan).

#### **3.1 Residential**

All Online Master's students are invited to attend a two-week residential session in May at CERAP in Abidjan. This gives them the opportunity to meet the academic staff and their peers with whom they have been working with on the internet throughout the year. The two week activities are designed to continue the personal and professional development they began during their online studies.

The two weeks also give them the opportunity to strengthen the networks that they have been online developing with their fellow students and the staff around the world.

During the CERAP Residential they will participate in a twoday peace resolution, simulation exercise. They will also undertake a three day personal development course as well as attend revision sessions for the modules that they have completed. Finally they will sit for their exams on the completed modules. The second week residential allows them to focus on specialist topics

### **3.2 Online Period: Modes of Teaching**

In this section we will only discuss the pedagogical model of the Online Period because I discovered that the course design (how material is presented and the interactivity) is very important.

For the Online Period, during the first academic year 2012-2013, two modes of teaching were used.

#### **The First Mode of Teaching**

CERAP uses MOODLE as the learning management system (LMS). Two courses were offered each month. The format of the course was left to the discretion of the teachers.

As a result for some courses, students have access to our LMS and are provided with a variety of materials: lecture notes and academic journal papers. For other courses, instead of course materials, students are provided with slides.

There were neither video nor audio lectures.

There were no questions to test students' understanding of the course materials

For some courses, where there were discussion forums. According to feedbacks from the online courses, it seems that in spite of the real but often late help on behalf of the teachers and/or the other students, many learners had difficulty in finding answers to their numerous questions. Indeed, the forums abounded in questions, but are sometimes lacking answers

Dissatisfied with the first mode of teaching, I decided to set up a second mode of teaching during the same academic year

#### **The Second Mode of Teaching**

The course format consists of five components:

- The lecture notes
- PowerPoint slides
- Audio recordings (where available) of 20 hours taken from CERAP teaching class to complete the online course materials
- Key readings selected by the lecture from leading academic journals to compensate for the lack of course materials.
- Finally, the establishment of a mentoring system to track the progress of the students' papers without looking at their progress in the course.

Whatever pedagogical model was adopted, the difficult part is probably the grading of examinations. For The Master Program in Peace and Conflict Studies where the exercises consist of written work, it is not possible to automate the correction as in the case of sciences such as physics, computer science or mathematics where automatic evaluation system is fairly easy to implement.

In our case, the approach was to ask the student to go to an assessment center in which he must identify himself and where he is monitored during the examination. The problem is to ensure that the person who takes the test is the person who he claims to be. Then, we send copies to the teacher for correction. Once the copies are corrected, I organized a consultation of the copies between teacher and students via Skype (webcam)

#### **4. How to make the online master program sustainable?**

CERAP is adopting an e-learning as a way to meet the strong demand for higher education. This demand it simply cannot be met with traditional campuses and programs. This goal could be achieved only under certain conditions and it is important to keep this in mind here.

##### **a) Define a Mode of teaching**

At this time I would suggest that CERAP implement the Coursera pedagogy:

- by translating into French the *Coursera Resource Guide* prepared by Vanderbilt University (<http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/files/coursera.pdf>) for the CERAP teachers.
- by choosing a formal course format for all its courses. Intellectual property will remain in the hands of CERAP as it is now. The material is covered over four weeks. Each week comprises lecture notes and a certain number of short video presentations (8-15 minutes). These presentations are followed by a quiz. The course ends with a final examination. The course tutor will also be available during week 4 to answer any outstanding questions from students. It is, indeed, necessary that the student is guided by expert tutors. Nothing replaces a trained teacher who can monitor progress and propose solutions

##### **b) Having trained staff in e-learning field**

The first pedagogical model of CERAP shows that technology must remain at the service of education and not the contrary. The training should really be designed in the context of interactivity, which involves much work that is commonly known as instructional design. It and teachers will have to work closely.

This means that in practice CERAP must build a faculty preparation course. Two training solutions can be proposed: an online training or a workshop.

CERAP must strengthen its team by recruiting a person who holds a graduate degree in Computer Science (Master), an assistant and a production manager. In short, CERAP must have some instructional designers who mediate between technicians and teachers who make the connection between technology and pedagogy.

##### **c) E-library**

CERAP must establish a Digital Library in order to allow students to have access to the CERAP's electronic resources and online journals, which they are expected to use for some of the activities. This may be possible by subscribing to JSTOR or through partnerships with universities.

#### **d) Financial resources**

At first glance, an online course is cheaper than classroom teaching, because it removes the costs of classroom, books and, especially the presence of a teacher. It is error to believe so. Like any good training solution, e-learning's quality has a cost both technical (servers, application development) and pedagogical (teacher salaries and assistants animated tutorials, screenwriting courses and video recordings. ). While the CERAP and tuition fees have funded the creation of the online Master Program in Peace and Conflict Studies, it is still not enough to finance all future developments. Increasing the tuition fees would prohibit many from the course

How to finance the e-learning at CERAP?

For now, there is no clear answer. I think CERAP can work with some universities to share some courses, course materials, and lecturer

CERAP could also organize a fundraising campaign

#### **5. Conclusion**

If all these conditions are met, online learning can be a good teaching tool. It also has the advantage to adequately meet the individual needs of the learner, allowing he/her to keep pace and choose the moments when he/she can go online. However, if these conditions are not met, the learning can be considered as a "gadget" giving the illusion that it is enough to click a mouse to learn.

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