

Sapienza University of Rome: Building a Collaborative Portal for Students and Faculty

CASE STUDY

Acquia, Cineca Partner in Developing Portal for Europe's Largest University

Sapienza University of Rome is the oldest University in Rome and the largest in Europe, with more than 125,000 students, 4,000 professors, and nearly as many administrative and technical staff members. Having created its website using three different content management systems and with an extremely high number of uncoordinated sites, the University faced significant challenges in managing it effectively. The web applications were developed both internally and by external suppliers, so it was difficult to link them to an overall development and governance plan. In many cases, the information was duplicated and often misaligned. As a result, the user experience was not always consistent and management costs were high. Sapienza's goal was to re-engineer its Information and Communications Technology (ICT) structure to become a highly efficient digital administration, supplying quality systems and services that could be used by a vast and heterogeneous user base.

"The challenge that the university has been working on over the last three years is not only to have a new portal but to completely change Sapienza University's ICT structure," said Prof. Tiziana Catarci, Vice Rector for Infrastructure and ICT, during a presentation in Bologna to representatives from more than 40 universities about integrating communication and services. "We are developing effective and efficient systems that allow us to save time and money and offer users better interaction with the university."

Sapienza looked to develop an entirely new university portal with a requirement for an open-source content management system (CMS) that was based on open standards (scripting, database, web service integration). Key considerations included whether the CMS had an extensive community of developers and users, provided granular control of user permissions, and supported multiple taxonomies and content tagging options.

Following its evaluation of CMS platforms, Sapienza chose Drupal for the development of its portal.

How They Are Doing It

Sapienza undertook the development of its new University Portal in three phases beginning with the Communication Portal—a public institutional portal. It integrated with IT systems for the display of certified information. It also facilitated extensive, distributed editing with editorial workflow and complied with the relevant laws and regulation.



COMPANY INFORMATION

- Sapienza University of Rome
- www.uniroma1.it
- Sapienza University of Rome, founded in 1303 by Pope Boniface VIII, is the oldest University in Rome and the largest in Europe.
- Industry sector: Higher Education
- Drupal user since 2011
- Cineca/Acquia client since 2011

SUCCESS ENABLED WITH

- Drupal CMS
- Cineca Professional Services
- Acquia Professional Services

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The second phase covered the Federated Department sites of the University, including the faculties, research centres, libraries, museums, and department sites. It was developed based on a common site model and through a participatory approach with the involvement of the Sapienza webmasters. The model was released in August 2011 and has already been adopted by a number of departments with the remainder to follow (there are 63 departments and 11 faculties at Sapienza).

"One of the greatest challenges that we have begun to deal with concerns the development of the federated sites. The goal is to have a single model capable of making the most of the particularities of the generalist nature of Sapienza and be interoperable with the other components of the portal ecosystem," Catarci said.

The Service Portal is the third and final phase of the project—providing a unified point of access to services, this will be interoperable and integrated with differing information systems as well as with the Communication Portal and Federated Departmental sites. Sapienza has set a goal of automating the entire process and attaining the maximum degree of interactivity—in accordance with the Nizza classification for online services—by 2014.

Sapienza chose Cineca to develop its portal because of its U-GOV Portal—a solution for University portals based on Drupal, the open-source web content management and collaboration platform. Cineca's solution has several characteristics Sapienza was looking for: open source, integration and interoperability, regulatory compliance, modularity and personalisation, mobile first and responsive web design approaches, user experience, and back-office usability.

U-GOV Portal is part of a structured and integrated system for the governance of Universities and Research Agencies developed by Cineca—U-GOV, an ERP System that provides management tools for different areas within an institution, such as accounting, human resources, teaching and students, planning and control, and research.

Acquia Professional Services assisted the Cineca Consortium and Sapienza University of Rome to reach a level of standardisation that allows leveraging the same Drupal components and architecture across projects, saving maintenance and building time.

"One of the main challenges was to convince the user base within the university that the change was necessary—so we involved not only the end users but also the internal users in the design process. In addition, after having developed the new Communication Portal with Drupal and in line with crowd sourcing approaches, we established a period during which the old portal coexisted with the new one. The new portal was published in preview only to allow internal and external users to try it, analyse it, and send feedback by completing an online questionnaire. The feedback was then analysed and some of it adopted, leading to changes to the portal," Catarci said.

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– Prof. Tiziana Catarci,
Vice Rector, Infrastructure and ICT

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The Results

Today Sapienza's portal is in use by more than 100,000 people, serving as a centre of collaboration for faculty and students. Sapienza and its Community Portal is now considered a centre of excellence by the other Italian universities, in light of the work carried out in terms of transparency and sharing of results.

"The portal is the place to meet, the strategic and central place," said Prof. Mario Morcellini during the inauguration of the new Sapienza portal. "We would like to make sure that this portal will promote student and faculty interactivity in the future."

Thanks to the work carried out with Cineca on the new Drupal portal, Sapienza managed to go from last to first in CENSIS/Repubblica's (Guide to Italian Universities 2012-2013) rankings on the use of the web among the "mega" universities with more than 40,000 students.

Following the adoption of the Cineca's U-GOV Portal, a Drupal-based solution, Sapienza has not only been able to realise its well-defined digital strategy, it has a powerful CMS platform capable of supporting the university in the continuing development of its website. Drupal has a vast number of modules that is made available by one of the largest and most dynamic open-source communities, ensuring it remains state of the art and able to adopt key trends, such as the growth in mobile.

As well as gaining internal web expertise—which covers participatory planning, user-centred design, on the job training, and training of the trainers, the University also now benefits from a number of new features that simplify the management of its web presence, prevent the duplication of data, and ensure an optimal user experience. These include:

- **Highly-Performant Platform:** The architecture is capable of supporting high daily traffic and with spikes during particular periods of the year, for example managing peaks of more than 144,000 page views/hour and a daily total of 1.4 million page views/day; 16 percent of visits are from mobile devices.
- **Permission Control:** The University now benefits from centralised coordination and organisation of editing, with a distributed model that has 115 editors working on their sections of expertise thanks to a sophisticated configuration of permissions with workflow.
- **Site Architecture:** The structure of the website has been streamlined using a common development model.
- **Data Validation:** Data now comes from authoritative and reliable sources, including various applications of the U-GOV Solution.
- **User Experience:** Simplification of user personas and a good content model deliver a better user experience.
- **Back-Office Usability:** Particular attention has been given to the user experience to assist with the execution of the daily work of the portal editors.

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As further indication of a successful project, Sapienza also reported positive site visitor feedback and increased internal user satisfaction due to ease of use.

Cineca Profile

Cineca is a non-profit Consortium, made up of more than 60 Italian Members (Universities, Research Institutes, and the Ministry of Education, University, and Research). Its High Performance Computer FERMI is the most important in Italy (ranked second in Europe and seventh worldwide). With more than seven hundred employees, Cineca operates in the technological transfer sector through high performance scientific computing, the management and development of networks and web-based services, and the development of complex information systems for treating large amounts of data.

Today Cineca is the high technology bridge between the academic world, research, industry, and public administration.

Cineca promotes innovative and integrated solutions to reduce technology and application costs, enhance management services, and monitor results. For this reason, in 2005 Cineca started developing U-GOV, a new integrated information system designed uniquely for Higher Education Institutions. U-GOV combines all the management applications for university's administrative areas in a single organic system. Personnel, accounting, research, learning, and student services coexist in a unique and integrated architectural environment, together with decision support tools.

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