

Chapter 5

Partnership and networking

Partnership has burgeoned in tertiary education over the last decades, and is a key characteristic of contemporary e-learning arrangements. The rationales for joining forces include achieving benefits such as advanced technology, quality curricula, enhanced market presence, and lower costs. This chapter documents institutional involvement in e-learning consortia of various kinds, arrangements to make an institution's e-learning materials available to third parties, for example through a fee-based or free repository, and cases where an institution outsources aspects of e-learning to third parties.

Partnership has burgeoned in tertiary education over the last decades, and is a key characteristic of contemporary e-learning arrangements (OECD, 2001, 2004). The rationales for joining forces include achieving benefits such as advanced technology, quality curricula, enhanced market presence, and lower costs. What kinds of partnerships are being formed? What kinds of activities are taken up by partnerships? This chapter documents institutional involvement in e-learning consortia of various kinds (5.1), arrangements to make an institution's e-learning materials available to third parties, for example through a fee-based or free repository (5.2), and cases where an institution outsources aspects of e-learning to third parties (5.3). The chapter also presents concrete activities reported by the OECD/CERI case studies institutions, and casts light on their diversity in terms of shared materials, joint technology development, "virtual university" networks, joint programmes, joint research, joint marketing, joint development funds and joint technology training, etc. Consortia ranged from sub-national, to national, to regional, to international. Sharing materials and outsourcing key aspects of e-learning activity was rare and not always given much strategic attention.

5.1. E-learning and other consortia

As higher education worldwide has become more internationalised, ICT-dependent, commercialised and mass-scale, the resources of individual

institutions may be seen alone as inadequate for the tasks at hand (Teather, 2004). As both cause and effect of these changes, it is not surprising that partnerships of various kinds have been a distinguishing feature of e-learning development in higher education in recent years.

The most prominent alliances have been between universities and the private sector (*e.g.* U21 Global – a commercial online provider – combining a number of research universities worldwide and the Thomson Corporation, see Box 5.1), and at national level (*e.g.* the formation of various national virtual universities – such as the Finnish Virtual University and the Dutch Digital University). There are also attempts to create regional universities *e.g.* University of Arctic, Mediterranean Virtual University and the proposed “European Networked University” involving universities from a number of European countries.¹ Non-delivery partnerships focus on such things as learning object repositories (*e.g.* the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching – MERLOT), IT procurement and good practice.

The underlying rationale across all these examples is that by joining forces, institutions are able to achieve benefits including more dynamic and relevant curricula, superior technology, enhanced market presence and lower costs. Of course, conceptual, structural or other weaknesses of a partnership can inhibit such aspirations. One study in Europe found a strong connection between “front-runner” universities in the development of e-learning and the extent of related partnerships with other organisations (PS RAMBOLL Management, 2004, p. 34). This finding was generally supported by the OECD/CERI sample, but with some important exceptions.

Box 5.1. U21 Global

U21 Global was established in 1999 to offer online courses in accountancy, business and IT, backed by 16 members of the international university consortium Universitas 21 and Thomson Learning (a subsidiary of Canadian publishing house Thomson Corporation). Universitas 21 (U21) brings together 16 research-intensive universities from around the world, including University of Edinburgh from the United Kingdom, University of Virginia from the United States, Fudan University from China and Lund University from Sweden. Following the launch of its first course (an MBA) in 2003, U21 Global is now branded as the “world’s premiere” online graduate business school.

1. See the MENU website: <http://ans.hsh.no/lu/inf/menu/>

Box 5.1. U21 Global (continued)

In the partnership, Thomson is responsible for supplying U21 Global with technological and administrative support, as well as contracting faculty to create and teach the courses. The universities have given their names to the venture (and some member faculty may develop/teach on some courses), and participate in U21pedagogica, a course approval body that is a branch of U21 independent from Thomson. Both U21 and Thomson each contributed US\$25 million to the project. The decision to create a new awarding body – in effect, U21 Global itself – rather than rely on awards of member institutions, marks U21 Global out from current and former competitors such as the Global University Alliance and UK eUniversities Worldwide. Students get a degree from U21 Global featuring the crests of all 16 member universities, which are committed to ensuring that programmes are of the same standing as those provided by their own universities.

In 2004, U21 was reported to have approximately 400 students from 25 countries enrolled in its MBA programme, and in October 2004 more than 1 400 applications were waiting to be processed. Just over a year after its launch, these figures might be judged a success. However, against the targets and projections for the operation, 400 enrolments seem far from optimal. U21 initially predicted that 1 000 students would be enrolled by 2003, 5 000 in 2004 and 27 000 students by 2005. The U21 Global MBA programme is evidence that fully online degree courses can be very time consuming to develop. Five years since its inception, U21 has only one core programme in operation (students may take individual courses within the MBA, as opposed to the entire degree). U21 Global is one of the survivors of the dot-com boom, when so many ill-conceived online higher education initiatives were launched, only to crash months or years later. However, it is difficult to assess long-term prospects. There is no published information on when U21 Global might break even, and no independent account of the student experience or retention/attainment rates. In late 2004, the company announced an interesting diversification to its business – to provide the online elements of a mixed mode programme offered by the Loyola Institute of Business Administration (LIBA). By selling already developed course material and support services, U21 Global might generate a new revenue stream, allowing enrolments on its core product, the MBA, to build slowly.

The project website can be found at: <http://u21global.com>

Respondents reported institutional involvement in a wide range of consortia and partnerships, encompassing shared materials, joint technology development “virtual university” networks, joint programmes, joint research, joint marketing, best practice, joint development funds, joint technology training, connectivity, specific applications, IT procurement and generic institutional associations. Consortia ranged from sub-national, to national, regional, and international. Respondents interpreted the question in different ways. For example, some mentioned membership of generic

institutional associations (*e.g.* regional associations of distance learning institutions), as well as more specific e-learning partnerships. Respondents from three institutions (UK Open University, Virtual University Tec de Monterrey and University of Sao Paulo) said that their institution was not a member of any relevant consortia. Some respondents included one-to-one institutional collaborations as well as larger groupings. Using the above categories, the reported partnerships are outlined as follows.

Generic distance learning/IT associations

Examples included the Inter-University Distance Learning Federation (University of Paris Nanterre – a longstanding network of distance/e-learning universities in France), the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (FernUniversität Hagen, Open University Catalunya), International Council for Open and Distance Learning (FernUniversität Hagen, Open University Catalunya), European Distance and e-learning Network (Open University Catalunya) and EDUCAUSE/EDUCAUSE Centre for Applied Science (ECAR) and the Western Co-operative for Educational Technology in the United States (Carnegie Mellon University, University of British Columbia). More selective examples included institution's membership of the "Common Solutions Group". This is a collective of US-based research universities that share experiences and good practice in the broad area of information technology (including considerable recent attention to e-learning, *e.g.* repositories, platforms and technical standards).

Shared materials/joint technology development

Examples included the Asia Pacific Initiative (Asian Institute of Technology). The Asian Pacific Initiative, led by the Tokyo-based United Nations University, was designed to establish institutional co-operation on the creation of e-learning materials concerned with human development and environmental sustainability. The Asian Institute of Technology was attempting to establish an "Asia Europe Meeting e-Education Hub" to facilitate the exchange of e-learning content and expertise between Asia and Europe, and to offer access to resources to less connected parts of both regions. The University of British Columbia was a member of edusource, Canada's network of object repositories, and was working with Western Washington University in the United States to explore teaching and learning applications that might enable online access to "major scientific instruments" (*e.g.* supercomputers). The University of British Columbia was a founding member of uPortal, an international consortium of universities and corporations established to develop an open source portal application.

“Virtual university” networks

Examples included the Asian Institute of Technology’s membership of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region Virtual University, an attempt to network the resources of a number of distance and open universities in the region; and Kyoto University’s membership of “University Consortium Kyoto”, a federation of universities in Kyoto to co-develop e-learning. Multimedia Kontor Hamburg itself was a “virtual university” consortium of six Hamburg universities. The University of British Columbia was a member of the longstanding “Open University Consortium”, pooling the distance learning provision of a number of universities and other institutions in the province. The University of South Australia and Monash University were members of the similar (national – involving 32 providers) “Open Universities Australia”. Universitas 21, of which the University of British Columbia is a member, has an e-learning delivery arm, U21 Global (run in co-operation with Thomson Learning, see Box 5.1), and a collective quality assurance function (that approves both U21 programmes and offers its services to third parties). The University of South Australia is a member of a similar initiative (bringing together six teaching/employability-driven universities from Australia, New Zealand, UK and USA), the Global University Alliance. Zurich University was part of the “Swiss Virtual Campus”, a federal scheme to co-ordinate e-learning development nationwide (see Box 8.1).

Joint programmes

Examples included Aoyama Gakuin University’s FAST (Financial Analysis and Security Trading) Programme – a financial trading simulation – run in co-operation with a small number of foreign universities, with Carnegie Mellon University’s Graduate School of Industrial Administration as the main partner. Using video-conferencing, students at Aoyama Gakuin University and elsewhere used the simulation to analyse data and develop practical skills, as well as exchange national perspectives. Institutional participants hold an annual conference. The Tertiary Accord of New Zealand (TANZ) has jointly developed a “Graduate Certificate in Applied e-learning” aimed at instructors from all education sectors. In a related development, the new “BCCampus” initiative (a collaboration between higher education institutions in British Columbia, including the University of British Columbia) aims to establish a “collaborative framework for course development”, as well as offering a provincial portal to e-learning provision.

Joint research/other co-operation

Examples included the Open Polytechnic New Zealand's membership of the "Tertiary Accord of New Zealand" (TANZ), an association of five New Zealand polytechnics. The aim of TANZ is to promote open sharing of developments and experiences, reduce duplication of effort, and to work towards good practice. The accord has a wide remit, including collaborative research into e-learning. FernUniversität Hagen is a member of EUROPACE, a network of universities, companies and agencies formed to co-operate on the development of ICT in European higher education.

Joint marketing

The Open Polytechnic New Zealand is part of the Wellington Education Cluster, a co-operative with two other local higher education institutions. One project is joint marketing of online courses. As already noted, the University of British Columbia is part of the new "BCCampus" portal initiative to offer a single online portal marketing higher education provision across the province. A more ambitious project is HEAL – Higher Education E-learning Courses Assessment and Labelling – funded by the European Commission. The aim of HEAL is to develop a European portal for quality-assured (making use of the European credit transfer system – ECTS) e-learning programmes, and to offer student support services. The University of Paris Nanterre is a participant (see Box 1.1).

Best practice

Examples included the "Roadmap to Redesign" project run by the Centre for Academic Transformation at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York State (Carnegie Mellon University is a core partner). The "Roadmap to Redesign" initiative builds on the "Pew Grant Programme in Course Redesign", a US\$8.8 million project designed to develop and trial methodologies to use forms of e-learning to reduce programme delivery costs and raise student attainment. The new venture is an attempt to streamline and disseminate to a wider audience those methodologies found to be most successful. Carnegie Mellon University was one of thirty institutions funded under the original programme. The University of British Columbia is a member of Universitas 21, an international network of research-intensive universities with a broad remit, including sharing best practice in teaching and co-operation concerning the development of learning technologies. The institution is also a member of the "New Media Consortium", an organisation that brings together "learning organisations" (e.g. higher education institutions, museums, libraries) and high-tech companies to collaborate in a non-competitive environment. The University

of Maryland University College is part of Sloan-C, a learning technology best practice network funded by the US Sloan Foundation.

Joint development fund

Examples included the “Melbourne-Monash Grant Schemes” funding innovative teaching and joint programme development, a joint initiative between Monash University and the University of Melbourne in Australia. The only reported example was training materials on webCT’s VISTA platform developed collaboratively by Monash University and Deakin University, Australia.

Connectivity

Examples included the Asian Institute of Technology’s involvement in the “Asian Internet Interconnection Initiative”, providing broadband connectivity to the region; and the University of British Columbia’s membership of BCNet, a non-profit society supporting advanced IT networks for the province’s research and education communities.

Specific applications

Examples included the Asian Institute of Technology’s work with the Japanese Space Exploration Agency and Malaysia’s Multimedia University on e-learning provision based on multi-point video-conferencing; and Kyoto University’s membership of the “Space Collaboration Consortium” (SCC), an initiative funded by the Japanese government. The aim of the SCC was to co-develop satellite-based delivery, and involved around 50 Japanese universities and research institutes. The University of British Columbia is a webCT Institute, one of a network of higher education institutions identified by webCT that demonstrate exemplary practice with respect to the use of webCT applications in support of university teaching and learning goals and support.

IT procurement

Examples included national purchasing agreements (covering particular hardware and software) encompassing all universities/higher education institutions (*e.g.* Australia, UK). The Open Polytechnic New Zealand is a member of New Zealand’s “Tertiary IT Procurement Group”. UCLA Extension mentioned institution-wide (across the multi-campus University of California) and state-wide procurement.

5.2. Third party access arrangements (Question 6.8)

Very few respondents cited cases of e-learning provision being sold to third parties. The only examples were the UK Open University's commercial arm Open University Worldwide, established specifically to sell the institution's programmes internationally and to the corporate sector, and instances where the Open University Catalunya has sold provision to other institutions. A similar arrangement is in place at the Open Polytechnic New Zealand.

All other activities cited concerned examples of, or interest in, making materials available for free. Perhaps the most developed example was Carnegie Mellon University's "Open Learning Initiative", a foundation-funded scheme to roll-out evidence-based e-learning programmes for free access by individuals (see Box 3.2). A number of other institutions pointed to recent changes of policy. Zurich University stated that the current version of its e-learning strategy gave a commitment to provide online guest access to all e-learning courses by Summer 2005; while at Kyoto University a specific position on intellectual property and dissemination has been adopted, making some materials available free and other for a fee.

Multimedia Kontor Hamburg indicated that it had yet to formulate a clear policy in this area, but expected to discriminate by user (*e.g.* free for use in undergraduate programmes offered by third parties, and fee-based if delivered to postgraduates or for continuing professional development purposes). The University of Sao Paulo respondent pointed to a tradition of mission based development and dissemination of materials and other resources to and for third parties, while the Aoyama Gakuin University respondent noted that some videoed lectures and associated notes were already freely available on its website. More generally, a few institutions said that where faculty members owned materials, some chose to post it online for public access. The Carnegie Mellon University respondent was of the opinion that one reason why some faculty are reluctant to do this was because of the general lack of fine-grained access controls in mainstream learning platforms (*e.g.* to restrict access to student grades).

The Asian Institute of Technology, UCLA Extension and the University of South Australia reported early discussions about third party access to materials (no further details given), while Monash University, the Open Polytechnic New Zealand and the Virtual University of Tec de Monterrey said no new third party access arrangements were currently on the agenda.

5.3. Outsourcing (Question 1.10)

Is outsourcing a significant reason for institution to engage in partnerships? An example of significant outsourcing is the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands which outsourced its computing centre to Cap Gemini/Ernst and Young (PS RAMBOLL Management, 2004, p. 114). Question 1.10 asked whether institutions outsourced any aspects of infrastructure, maintenance or operations associated with e-learning. Most institutions in the OECD/CERI sample reported no significant activity of this kind, and seven none at all (Asian Institute of Technology, Aoyama Gakuin University, Carnegie Mellon University, FernUniversität Hagen, Kyoto University, University of Paris Nanterre, University of Sao Paulo).

The key exceptions were the Open Polytechnic New Zealand, UCLA Extension and the Open University Catalunya. In order to enter the fully online delivery market more quickly, the Open Polytechnic New Zealand contracted with NextEd, an e-learning brokerage, development and support firm, originally in Hong Kong, China, and now based in Australia. Using fully online courses developed by the institution in-house, NextEd provided a customised learning management system (a version of Blackboard), hosting, 18/7 technical support and copy editing. The rationale for this arrangement was that “the Open Polytechnic had a good materials development system, but very little experience with real-time customer support and electronic delivery”. Now the Open Polytechnic New Zealand has shifted to Moodle (replacing both the in-house “Online Campus” learning management system (LMS) and NextEd’s adapted version of Blackboard), the overall level of outsourcing has increased. Hosting and support has been contracted out to a local private firm (Catalyst, based in Wellington).

In the case of UCLA Extension, all initial e-learning efforts were undertaken in partnership with an outside company – OnlineLearning.net, now owned by the US firm Laureate Education. Course development was pursued jointly, and technical maintenance, student support and marketing were outsourced. The rationale was to engage in unfamiliar activities at a predictable cost by utilising specialist expertise. The Open University Catalunya indicated that a wide range of activities (*e.g.* authoring and production of e-learning materials, tutors, helpdesk, 24x7 technical maintenance and materials distribution) were outsourced, but offered no further details. Through its membership of the Global University Alliance, the University of South Australia contracts some aspects of hosting and technical support to NextEd.

The only other examples of outsourcing were small scale, ad hoc contracting of third party specialists (*e.g.* instructional designers, graphic

design, Web design). For example, prior to its demise, the UK eUniversity offered an Open University programme. The rationale for the UK Open University was to compare the production/presentation/marketing arrangements of a third party with in-house structures. By definition, university members of Multimedia Kontor Hamburg “outsource” aspects of e-learning development to the consortium (*e.g.* Multimedia Kontor Hamburg’s joint audio-visual studio and multimedia production lab). Of course, many sample institutions “buy-in” key elements of e-learning functionality (*e.g.* learning management systems and other applications) that sometimes include external hosting. The University of Maryland University College cited only “some assistance” with the operation of a call centre.

The Open Polytechnic New Zealand respondent offered some thoughts on the balance between in-house and outsourced arrangements. An attempt from the institution to outsource (as above) some elements of course development and marketing was said to have not always worked well, and it was implied that outsourced copy editing did not always offer the institution sufficient flexibility to make changes. (More generally, the outsourcing company was reported to be both reliable and cost-effective). The decision by the Open Polytechnic New Zealand to adopt Moodle (offering faculty more control over online course development and maintenance), building on the larger decentralisation agenda, and the outsourcing of hosting and technical support, is noteworthy. It suggests a model where the institution retains and devolves responsibility for the (core) activities of programme development, but outsources the (non-core) activity of hosting and technical support.

The UK Open University respondent commented that “our experience to date is that an external organisation was unable to better anything we could achieve through our own (cheaper) internal processes and systems”. The UCLA Extension reported that their arrangement provided a healthy challenge to conventional ways of working, but equally was seen to constrain some forms of experimentation when particular directions did not “align with the strategic goals of our partner”. The University of British Columbia respondent commented that vendor hosting was generally looked upon as a short-term solution – as a means of trialling a particular application (before hosting in-house) and building local capacity. This matched the perspective of UCLA Extension, if on a longer development cycle. The institution has now built up internal capacity across all previously outsourced functions. The contract with the company expired in the Summer of 2004, when all activity was taken in-house. The decision to shift the entire operation in-house was based on a long-term vision of e-learning as central to advancing UCLA Extension’s overall commitment to student learning. Zurich University cited short-term external contracting of some

aspects of technical/student support, software engineering and multimedia production, but stated that the aim had always been to learn from others in order to build internal capacity, and that most such outsourcing had already been discontinued.

Overall, it was striking that all sample institutions saw only minimal or short-term value in outsourcing key aspects of e-learning activity. This suggests a view of e-learning as core business, and a higher education setting as the best long-term development environment. This was supported by findings from the Observatory survey (specifically a question on outsourcing of general IT). No institution reported significant outsourcing of IT functions currently in place, and only one said such an arrangement was planned during the next year. Only a further eight (7%) cited plans on even a five-year horizon. Eighty-two per cent said that outsourcing in this area was currently not a strategic priority. The United States Campus Computing Survey for 2003 reported similarly high figures (Green, 2003, p. 20).

5.4. Conclusion

Partnership is another key characteristic of contemporary e-learning, and as already mentioned, partnerships may extend to a wide of range of activities. Many of the partnerships cited in this chapter are recent, or even not fully formed, so an assessment of impact or value is often not possible. Moreover, it was notable that some institutions very active in e-learning (*e.g.* UK Open University, University of Maryland University College, Virtual University of Tec de Monterrey) claimed to have few if any relevant partnerships. This may reflect a narrow notion of partnership, but serves as a reminder that “standing apart” may be viewed as robust a strategy as “pooling resources”.

Aside from limited commercial activity at the UK Open University and the Open University Catalunya, and the “Open Learning Initiatives” at Carnegie Mellon University, few respondents had given much strategic attention to making e-learning materials available to a wider audience (whether free or for a fee). Across all respondents, significant outsourcing of e-learning activities/support was rare and often temporary. Overall, it was striking that all sample institutions saw minimal or short-term value in outsourcing key aspects of e-learning activity. This suggests a view of e-learning (in the broadest sense – content development, delivery, technology, support etc) as core business, and a higher education setting as the best long-term development environment. Whether this view over-extends the notion of the “core”, and may foster long-term inefficiencies, is open to discussion.

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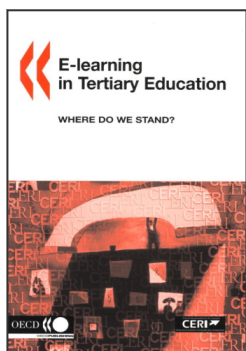
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