Educating and organising globally: perspectives on the internet and higher education

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Electronic learning and the globalisation of higher education are often viewed by academics chiefly as threats to their indpendence and autonomy. Carolyn Allport argues that we need to remain alive to both the benefits and the dangers of this new educational world.

The arrival of the 'internet' or 'e' university has coincided with media, communication and information technology convergence, increased commercialisation and corporatisation of universities, and the rise of 'for-profit' education, particularly in the vocational training area. The new 'borderless' environments, facilitated by new technologies, channel the ways in which higher education institutions respond to internationalisation and globalisation. Together with a seeming lack of legal regulation in cyberspace, these global developments have created real dilemmas for higher education institutions and faculty facing falling public investment and increased public and community expectations of their role in lifelong learning.

For some the e-university is seen primarily as a threat. In the Australian context it is sometimes presented as perhaps the greatest weapon of economic rationalists in their battle to marketthe provisions of higher education. In the international context the same writers sometimes depict this convergence of new technologies as a 'new colonialism', particularly in relation to international agreements such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). To others, it is a pure technology, unsullied by traditional power relations, with potential to democratise education and enhance cultural and social understanding in a borderless world. Both these views are excessively reliant upon different versions of technological determinism, one of the most pervasive habits of thought in the West over the last two centuries.

In my view we will be in a stronger position if we move away from these two extreme positions, and concentrate instead on the linkages between the educational issues surrounding e-learning and the economic structures that are being used to promote greater international delivery of e-courses. Important here is the role of international cartels in partnership arrangements that cross national boundaries and which involve 'for profit' media or Information Technology (IT) companies in curriculum development and delivery. And so I am less concerned here with the pedagogic arguments around technology-based learning and delivery – though there is a large and interesting literature on that subject – than with promoting active discussion on the nature of our strategic response.

Part one: Rules of the game

Higher education staff are amongst the most 'wired' people in the world. The origin of the Internet in US military-related scientific research based in universities, and its rapid diffusion across university departments meant that higher education personnel were at the edge of the new technology, often playing leading roles in constructing the new forms of communication, and providing user-friendly access to the Web. Why is it then that the champions of the virtual university position staff as a conservative force, holding back the limitless gains from Internet and Web-based learning? Why is it that the virtual university is posited as student-centred, when evidence tells us that students overwhelmingly prefer a campus-based experience?

At one level, the virtual university is an outgrowth of distance education, or external education. It separates the student from their peers and from the campus, but retaining some component of interactive learning with a teacher. Learning materials are packaged, allowing the student to sample material largely within their own time frame, and are marketed to those who are unable to access a campus-based experience. Initial data also suggest that the take-up and drop out rates in 'virtual' programs are similar to those in traditional distance education. Like distance education, e-education is capable of enhancing the participation of disadvantaged groups – across space,

across home and work, and across all age groups. In this sense, we could expect the 'virtual university' to simply be one of a number of learning environments within universities, perhaps catering for between ten and thirty percent of total student demand.

What is agreed is its unsuitability for undergraduate education for school leavers, who are seen not to have the independent self-directed study skills and motivation required. Nor, it seems do they or their families desire it. The evidence is clear: parents value the residential/campus based experience as an essential part of the educative processes of early adulthood. It is not just an information-based experience – it is one where networks and associations are formed, often ones important for student's later careers. Even older students prefer face-to-face or mixed modes of education, and retention levels are higher where the campus-based program is being used to upgrade or extend existing qualifications. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) education is more popular among those corporate universities in the US that deliver training on site to their employees. Even here, though, some institutions - such as Motorola University - still use classroom training as the main pedagogical instrument. While Motorola does make use of the new technologies, it has no ambition to deliver more than 30% of its training to the desktop. At the University of Phoenix the majority of students still attend face-to-face classes at smaller decentralised campuses, while Western Governors University, an Internet-based university in the US, has faced difficulties in attracting students.

Just as in traditional distance education, success with ICT or web-based learning depends upon acquiring adequate levels of staff support and overcoming student isolation. Putting a course on the web does not guarantee that learning takes place, any more than does the presence of a library on campus. There have been concerns raised as to the instrumentalist nature of ICT learning, and the need to keep human agency central to the pedagogical process. Previous experience of computer based learning materials have made teaching staff cautious about the impact on critical thinking and the discursive nature of higher education. The accessibility and vast storage resources of the Web also raise important issues for assessment procedures – a number of sites now offer student essays and notes for purchase, and there is concern about a perceived tendency towards 'cut and pastiche' techniques in student work. Unfortunately, this has meant that there are now increased calls for a return to a supervised examination assessment system, undermining some of the more innovative assessment developments of past decades. Generating materials is also costly. One Australian university estimated that the production of 12 high quality CD-ROMs for language training consumed 36,000 project team hours and cost A$3.3 million. This does not include the need to update material in order to provide 'state of the art' learning. Finally, there is continuing debate about the

differences between information and knowledge. As one writer aptly warned: "Will the wise person of the future be someone who knows nothing but can find anything?"

It is in primary and secondary education, adult education and in workplace training that the marketing of ICT materials is making the most striking progress. In these sectors some 'for-profit' education companies are moving beyond simply providing 'carrier' platform and IT infrastructure, and directly hiring staff to develop 'content'. Given the pre-eminence of the life-long learning model in public policy, universities need to reposition themselves in relation to these developments, so as not to find themselves confined to a shrinking and more elite market in the future. This raises new questions about the need to employ business or corporate models of efficiency and productivity in repositioning higher education, and of the influence of such models on the complex cultural and social matrix of education. Such arrangements also advance the cause of user-pays financing in higher education because the complexity of funding arrangements across political boundaries make this kind of financing attractive.

At a global level, there is reason for concern that increased use of ICT education packages may exacerbate existing economic and social disparities between regions. E-learning and the 'virtual' university depend upon high levels of connectivity among students and staff, and on the ability of institutions and companies to sustain high investment and maintenance expenditure. The digital divide is a real one – both across geographic boundaries, and within national borders. Currently access to the Internet is highly concentrated. Less than 2% of the world's population is connected. Industrialised countries with only 15% of the world's population are home to 88% of all Internet users. Less than 1% of people in South Asia are online, though one-fifth of the world's population lives in this region. The situation is even worse in Africa – with 739 million people, there are only 14 million phone lines. That is fewer than Tokyo or Manhattan. Eighty percent of those lines are in six countries, with only 1 million Internet users compared to 10.5 million in the UK. 80% of the world's web sites are in English, a language understood by only 1 in 10 of the world's population.

Even within nations with high levels of Internet access and home computers, such as the US, a real digital divide remains. This is not only a division between the educated and the rest: it runs through the education system itself. A recent US national survey report, *Historically Black Colleges and Universities: An Assessment of Networking and Connectivity* suggests that these institutions are lagging behind in offering students access to computing resources and in taking advantage of high-bandwidth technologies. There is also a wider concern in first world countries more generally about the high costs associated with purchasing equipment, maintaining it and paying for connection costs, all of which are expected to be the student's responsibility. In Australia, income and geography are still

powerful forces in determining the information rich and the information poor. In Asia, seen to be a key market for the export of education, concern is rising that exporting students and importing courses also present a very real threat to student's sense of identity, culture and family values.

As we discuss how to overcome these divides, we must remind ourselves that as educators we have a moral responsibility to ensure that old barriers to access are not replicated in cyberspace. If we are to utilise new communications and information based technologies, then we need to develop ways of globalising without colonising.

Among existing higher education institutions, especially public institutions, the model for transnational Internet education is a consortium involving partnerships with private communications or media companies. The key issues for staff arise in two distinct areas: the ICT mechanisms through which courses are delivered, and the role that corporate interests play in the new consortia. These intersect in specific questions around new employment relationships, intellectual property, changing university identity and governance structures, and quality assurance.

New employment relationships

One of the main reasons for the lack of enthusiasm among some staff to engage with online delivery is concern about the 'unbundling' of the academic role. Most ICT-based courses are developed within team structures that separate curriculum development, materials design, learning support and assessment. All of which leads to increases in the employment of contingent labour with little if any connection to research. In cases where online providers are tendering for teaching content from academics who may never have contact with the student using these materials, there is further disaggregation of the academic role. Similarly the role of general or support staff is changing as more become involved in online education as facilitators, and in some cases developers of curriculum. As the lines between faculty and other staff blur, we need to be vigilant that the contribution of all staff to scholarly enterprises are recognised and rewarded appropriately. Unions also need to get smarter about using these same technologies in order to organise and represent the new types of academic labour.

Of equal concern is the impact that these new technologies have on staff workloads and student:staff ratios. Many staff report that while it is increasingly expected that their courses will have online components, little if any training accompanies the imposition of such expectations. Time and space differentials attached to global Internet delivery has raised student demands for more immediate responses from staff. In some instances, staff are expected to be available all the time, as well as responding to an ever-growing email correspondence. Staff at one Austral-

ian institution cite the example of students in Dubai who expect to speak with staff at 2am or 3am Australian time. Unions need to monitor this work intensification.

Intellectual property

In the commercial environment, universities and associated public entities such as libraries are moving away from established conventions on ownership and use of intellectual property. A dispute in Canada during 2000 on the placing of PhD and Masters theses on a for-profit web site, without the permission of the originators of the works, is a case in point. There, the National Library, where theses have traditionally been deposited on the basis of use by researchers and scholars, contracted-out to a private operator who then charged to make the work available. While the authors were entitled to royalties from the firm that marketed their theses, none were received. The theses have since been withdrawn pending further negotiations.

In many universities staff own the copyright attached to their course materials. In the online environment, these are easy to turn into saleable products once translated into packaged materials. At some institutions, university administrations assert that copyright should now be shared, given that university infrastructure and skills have been added to the product. At others, staff are encouraged to sell or otherwise assign their copyright. Having bought it, the university can do what it likes to the content, and it can also determine the level of royalties paid to the academic. The University of Phoenix pays staff a flat fee for each video class with no royalties for a repeat or relayed broadcast. This contrasts with contract conditions for non-educational stars in other industries.

Changing university identity and governance structures

The ability of any institution or consortium to capitalise on the online market will depend largely upon the balance between recognition and price. Not all will be able to survive the high costs of providing and supporting online education. One high-profile consortium is Universitas 21 (or U21 - an alliance of 18 universities), which has tried to attract international institutions that have recognisable and acknowledged quality 'brands'. Similarly consortia that involve well-established and high ranking universities in Europe and North America would largely be trading on their brand. This makes it difficult for new entrants, even if they aim at a lower cost market, as the Open University in the UK found out in its initial stages. As part of establishing U21, 'brand name' valuations were commissioned to measure the universities' respective contribution to any joint venture, and university leaders at one prominent U21 site speak about their work as 'brand equity managers'.

The most interesting issues associated with U21 are the nature of their partnerships with communications and

media transnationals, and the fact that students will graduate from the U21 sponsored institution, not from any of the participating institutions. Initially, U21 sought partnerships with News Corporation and Microsoft, finally signing a deal in July 2001 with Thomson Learning, a subsidiary of Thomson Corporation. Universitas 21, the company that brings together all the participating institutions, is incorporated in Guernsey, a known 'tax haven'.

Public information about the deal was sparse; most of what we knew came through the mass media, or via press release. There was little discussion at the participating institutions – conversations about such an important venture seemed to be taking place only in the inner sanctum of university Vice-Chancellors and Presidents. This much was evident: the deal would involve the creation of an on-line for profit university with content commissioned from around the world. The potential to earn valuable income has been attractive to participating institutions, many of which face diminishing national public funding.

The U21 venture raises important issues about the new models of global delivery and brings into focus the sharp end of the corporatisation of higher education. Under the proposed deal Thomson Corporation will be responsible for course design, content development, testing and assessment and student database management and translation. The universities will license their 'brand names', receiving money for allowing the crests of their institutions to be used by the new international institution. The universities are not selling their courses; rather it is their reputation that seems up for sale.

A Thomson spokesperson stated that U21's structure 'enabled it to take a powerful international brand, credible quality assurance and multi-jurisdictional certification, and add Thomson Learning's expansive content and course development experience', predicting a market of 97 million students by 2010. Thomson has shifted its resources from newspaper holdings to education, purchasing recently Prometric, an IT assessment company for US$4.2 billion, Petersons, a student admissions company for US$2 billion, and acquiring the higher education area of Harcourt Publishing for another US$2 billion.

Little detail of the deliberations governing relationships with private companies is available through records of university governing bodies, and debate over these deals is often interpreted as attacks upon them. The relative dearth of information suggests that university governance structures are seen as an impediment to the kind of commercial venture envisaged by the U21/Thomson proposal. However, the fact remains that university governing bodies are charged with the good governance of the institution and, in Australia, are legally responsible for the proper conduct of its financial affairs. Commercial agreements usually require a degree of confidentiality, but when public universities are underwriting such ventures,

we need more effective participation by the university community.

In the case of U21 all the start-up costs for the joint venture were met by the University of Melbourne, and the other Australian partners, University of New South Wales and the University of Queensland, also invested in the venture. Yet how can we be assured that this is a good use of public money – particularly after the collapse of the News Corp deal? And will the university be able to recover any of its expenditure to date? It is in the interest of maintaining executive power that such information is not broadly available – but it is not necessarily in the interests of the university or the community that it serves. On a cost-benefit basis, the public university may be losing out.

Quality Assurance

There is a powerful tension between the provision of tailored courses to meet the needs of niche markets and the broader teaching, scholarship and research undertaken in our universities. The latter is underpinned by the advancement of knowledge, the former by a more utilitarian perspective on education. If the balance tips too far in favour of educational services tailored for global markets, we could well see a narrowing of the knowledge base within our universities, and the growth of a more instrumentalist pedagogy or, at best, significant discrepancies between the nature and quality of educational provision and scholarly activity within the university and the quality of on-line courses to which the institution's name is attached. If the universities' accreditation processes are effectively 'sold' to a global provider, what is the role of the universities' academic board in this respect? Will accreditation processes come under pressure from commercial concerns? This has long-term implications, not just for the quality of on-line provision through the new university, but for the reputation and quality assurance procedures within each of the participating public universities.

Part two: Entering the game – strategies for the future

Any strategies that academic staff and their unions develop to meet these challenges must involve both local and global interventions. Further, such interventions will be most effective if they are consistent across local and global frameworks, and if they arise from a dialogue at the global level.

Industrial and legal regulation

This is a new area for many academic unions, who for most of their history have depended upon national or regional regulation, accreditation and identity. Academic staff have had a long history of working within international networks, but this has reflected commitment to discipline or knowledge area, rather than to employment and profes-

sional concerns. At present there is little international regulation of academic work beyond the level of convention and normative instruments such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel. Academic unions need to investigate the ways in which they can strengthen involvement in international forums such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO). They need also to formulate advice for direct negotiations with the International Association of Universities and the International Association of University Presidents. As education goes global, and university employers seek global consortia arrangements, university staff unions must also begin to negotiate at a global level as well as at a local level. Given that the International Association of University Presidents publicly signed up to the UNESCO World Declaration and Framework for Action, this and the reporting facility under the UNESCO recommendation cited above make obvious starting points, GATS and other bilateral or multilateral trade agreements are also important points of intervention. Unions need an international industrial and organising strategy, as well as a policy response.

Organise around the cartels

While there are a number of cartels attempting to establish in the international e-learning environment, it was the U21 proposal that attracted the attention of academic unions in Australia and New Zealand. Partly this arose because of the leading role played by the Vice-Chancellor at the University of Melbourne in establishing U21, and the particular problems of governance and accountability that had already arisen with other commercial ventures of that institution, and the real academic concerns that came from the contracting out to Thomson of what were seen as the core academic functions of curriculum development and delivery, assessment and quality assurance through academic boards. There were also concerns from student and staff associations that students would graduate from U21, with the crests of individual institutions surrounding the testamur, yet there seemed no institutional assurance process for the courses developed by Thomson. Staff and students did value the reputation of their universities and wanted assurance that this new online venture would not compromise that reputation.
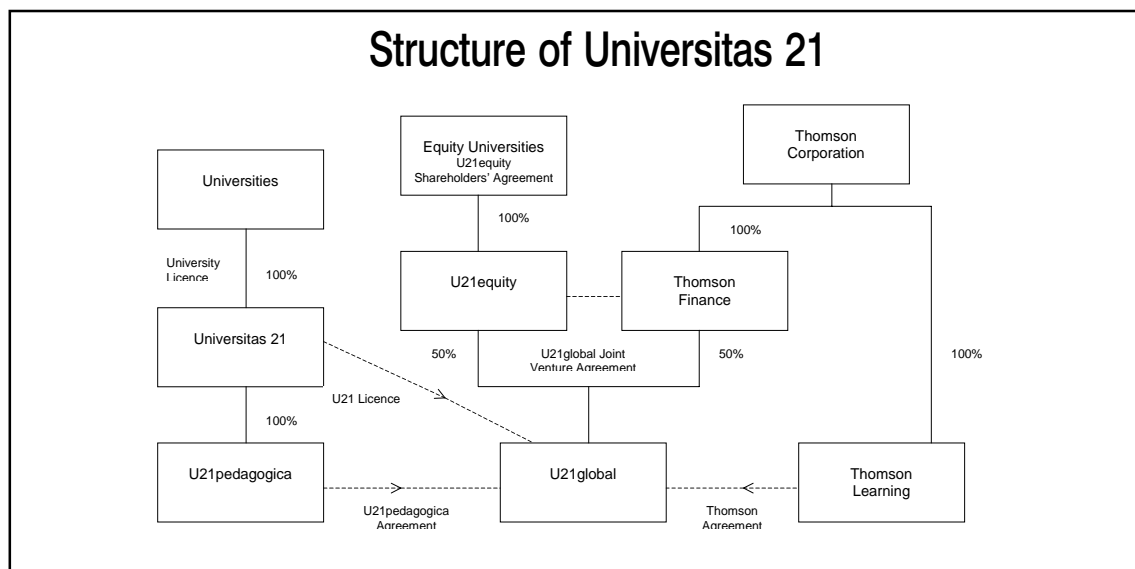
Our first response was to form email networks with other staff and student organisations in many of the U21 institutions and to encourage staff and students to utilise their international meetings to develop strategies for engagement with U21. These mechanisms facilitated exchange of information about the activities of the initial set-up of U21 and fostered discussion around governance structures for the new e-university, and the way in which staff and students would be involved. At this early stage, staff and students were extremely concerned at the failure of the university to discuss the proposed venture openly at the governing board, and more broadly with staff and students. Through staff and student representatives on such boards, we developed a common set of questions to assist network participants to question their own institutions in the public interest. Institutional responses were then distributed to all on the confidential email list.

In an environment where we are seeing a shift in universities' assets from the public institution into commercial ventures, the questions asked went to corporate and financial arrangements, including methods for staff appointments and under which jurisdiction those employment arrangements are made. Financial due diligence is an important feature of the transfer from public to private identity, and full disclosure under such processes is essential. Staff and student representatives on governing boards also asked questions associated with academic due diligence and governance. In particular the questions were about how quality assurance and accreditation was to operate in the consortium, and what processes were to be put in place for report back to the governing boards of the public institutions. These questions then became the basis of a joint letter to the U21 Secretariat from faculty unions from Australia, New Zealand, UK, Europe and North America. Our letter was written from the perspective of public responsibility – as university unions and staff associations we held it to be important to protect the interests of our members and defend the integrity and reputation of our institutions, and the educational programs offered through partnership arrangements with other institutions.

Utilising the UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel, signed by our national governments, the signatories of the letter drew attention to the key issues of accountability of universities, duties and responsibility of teaching personnel, intellectual property, quality assurance, academic freedom, governance, representation and employment protection established under the normative instrument. We also informed U21 that we would forward to the consortium a log of claims in respect of the Thomson Learning arrangement, and Universitas 21 activities more generally.

It must be said that the staff and student associations are not inherently opposed to collaborative projects between universities across the globe. There are other alliances that operate which retain quality assurance and academic oversight at the participating institution, and utilise their international alliances to offer greater course choice for students, and enhance staff exchanges between partners. Such ventures do usually have a private sector partner to maintain the technical platform essential for high quality distribution on the net. Others, such as MIT, are keen to use the web to offer open access learning, and to use this to encourage further study. Our concerns were clearly focused on the implications of e-learning becoming a for-profit venture where educational standards may be at risk from the commercial bottom-line, where governance

Structure of Universitas 21

Universities — University Licence — 100% — Universitas 21

Equity Universities
U21equity
Shareholders' Agreement — 100% — U21equity

Thomson Corporation — 100% — Thomson Finance

U21equity — 50% — U21global Joint Venture Agreement — 50% — Thomson Finance

Thomson Corporation — 100% — Thomson Learning

Universitas 21 — U21 Licence — 100% — U21pedagogica

U21pedagogica — U21pedagogica Agreement — U21global — Thomson Agreement — Thomson Learning

structures could be compromised, and working conditions and collegiality sacrificed.

U21 is interesting because it uses the business technique of establishing a number of associated companies to further remove the operating company from its actual owners. This acts to formally separate the universities from the 'business' end of U21. We now have quite a clear picture of the way U21 is to operate.

The key operating company will be U21global – jointly owned by U21 (through U21equity) and Thomson. It will appoint staff and operate the business. Academics are to be renamed as course developers, instructors and assessors and will be contracted by U21global through a tender process. U21global was established in September 2001, and registered in Singapore where activities of trade unions are highly circumscribed. The joint venture capital between the partners is said to be S$90 million. The interim chair of U21global, Professor Alan Gilbert, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, confidently asserts the academic integrity and commercial viability of the new venture in words that speak more to the profit motive than to educational quality:

[because] the fundamental business architecture, brand value and market demand are right, and because Thomson is a superb partner, with the resources, skills, experience, infrastructure and focus in on-line learning to leverage the brand value accreditation capability of Universitas 21

The difficulty here is the lack of independent quality assurance mechanisms in the international arena. Universitas 21 has developed its own assurance company, U21pedagogica, which seemingly will assure U21 learning products, as well as attempting to establish itself as an assurance agency for other transnational ventures.

Little is known of the way intellectual property will be protected, nor can we be guaranteed that information about the activities of U21global will be reported back to

the university communities that are subsidising this for-profit venture. Ultimately the participating institutions derive money from the sale of their brand name and any profits that accrue as an equity partner, while faculty will experience an unbundling of their work – separating course design and curriculum development from the learning and assessment processes creates educational difficulties, as well as encouraging increases in contingent labour, and there are no guarantees that those employed will be from the participating institutions.

There has been an acceptance of the need for student representation within the U21 governance structures (which the student network has taken over and is reshaping). There are no plans to include staff in any of the governance structures of the new global university.

Intellectual Property Rights

As the commercial value of copyright increases, it is not clear that academics can expect the same protection for intellectual property that they have historically enjoyed. Some institutions are already arguing that the employer owns all intellectual property generated in the course of employment. We will have to be vigilant that our own rights to ownership and control of intellectual property are not eroded within our own institutions if we are to defend them in an international on-line environment.

International agreements on intellectual property will be increasingly significant. The trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights (TRIPS) agreement binds World Trade Organisation nations to ensure some standardisation of intellectual property rights to facilitate trade in knowledge. Interestingly, while it calls upon member nations to observe the defence of copyright in literary and artistic works contained in the Bern convention, it makes an exception in the case of moral rights. Moral rights exist separate from ownership, and include the rights of the originator to be attributed, and to object to any distortion

of his or her work that may have a detrimental impact on his or her honour and reputation. In an on-line environment, where teaching and learning materials are packaged and re-packaged for sale and their use is difficult to track, industry unions may need to seek some international agreement on the moral rights of originators within the e-university.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation

Most accreditation processes for new providers in higher education lie with governments or government agencies. In some cases, this is supplemented by regional agreements for cross-accreditation. The new global online environment will attract new ventures aiming to cash in on the latest 'for-profit' industry, with, at times, questionable commitment to educational standards or to public accountability. In Australia there have been quite spectacular failures of firms involved in the English teaching and postgraduate business administration areas. The same is true of the US. Early 'virtual' universities such as the California Virtual University failed, and have now only recently been reconstituted largely through support from state funds and the community college sector. In 2000 the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in the US raised concerns about the volatility of online education companies and their attempts to raise capital on the stockmarket. In this volatile environment it is critical that any local accreditation regulations are amended to seek quality assurance control over all the operations of institutions incorporated in their jurisdiction, including international operations. In the first instance, quality and accountability standards expected in the domestic arena should also be translated into standards for international provision.

There is emerging evidence that national agencies will have to deal with global accreditation procedures. In Australia, the new 'National Protocols' signed by all States and Territories, as well as our national Government, specifically include international companies associated with Australian universities. The purpose of the protocols is to guide all levels of Government with accreditation and quality assurance responsibilities in drafting new legislation in their respective jurisdictions. Yet this is not the case in other countries where there is considerable variation. In some countries, these processes have been influenced by broader public sector reform with elements of contestability across public and private institutions. In others, there is a long investigation period before new entrants are certified. Some countries ensure that fees for registering a course in a national jurisdiction are high enough to ensure only serious stable candidates need apply. For example in Hong Kong, USQ paid A$106,000 to register seventeen distance education courses. While some online providers see limitless potential in the Asian region, many local commentators believe that countries such as China will guard its accreditation systems against the onslaught from Western sellers of higher education.

As consortia are further developed, there clearly needs to be some international academic accreditation, or cross-linking processes to national or regional standards. One of the strongest proponents of online learning, the American Glenn R Jones, attempted to establish his own international accreditation agency, called Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE). Initially GATE attracted the attention of many universities and academics seeking some sort of international quality control. It was run by a well known Washington-based non-profit group, the Centre for Quality Assurance in International Education, and had an international board of accreditors and educators. Yet GATE has since come under fire from critics who say that it has become a corporate entity riddled with conflicts of interest, and no longer viable as a quality agency. In 2000 Jones removed many of the internationally recognised accrediting experts from the company, and replaced them with members of other Jones Enterprise companies. GATE has since focussed on its distance education programs. Those universities who backed the GATE venture have subsequently disassociated themselves from both Jones and GATE.

This experience underlines the importance of developing some intergovernmental or international non-government agency to develop quality assurance processes, as well as accreditation and student complaints mechanisms. There is an opportunity here for academic unions to develop international standards, and to seek to play a major role in international accreditation, including encouraging their national governments to be conscious of the need to deal with the outcomes of international delivery of educational services.

Seek alliances with Students

Students have demonstrated concern about maintaining the quality of their educational experience at a time when some universities apparently see online learning as simply a source of 'quick-fix' cash. They have the right to expect that staff involved in the teaching-learning process will have high levels of competency and experience. There are also limited complaints mechanisms or consumer protections for students in global delivery, or for that matter against private institutions that fail in the market. There are very good reasons why students are cautious of the promises of the brave online environment even though they are often strong users of the web. Students and staff can also assist to mobilise community opinion on educational issues when institutions privatise and move away from the public identity. Here it is useful to consider the work of other unions and community organisations in calling firms to stand by their commitment to corporate citizenship, to accept that they have responsibility and accountability in the broader public world, and that this matters to their shareholders.