

Session 5: Workshop 6

Title: Universitas 21

Presenter: Professor Raewyn Dalziel, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Auckland (a U21 member)

Chair: Professor Kamal Dwivedi, Vice-Chancellor, Arunachal University

Rapporteur: Dr Jonathan Jenkins, ACU

Session background: in the two weeks preceding the ACU conference, Professor Alan Gilbert, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne and current chair of U21, had issued (through the Chronicle of Higher Education) a defence of U21, especially in the context of industrial relations in the higher education sector in Australia and fierce media criticism there. Subsequently, and before the conference, a riot of students at the Melbourne campus witnessed 70 arrests and the ransacking of Professor Gilbert's office.

Abstract of Workshop

Professor Dalziel outlined the structure of U21; its proposed partnership (timetabled to be ratified within the next month) with Thomson Learning to establish an e-education enterprise named U21 Global; its schedule to award degrees; and the formation of U21 Pedagogica to quality assure the degree courses themselves

Presentation

U21 was introduced in the context of a global world of education provision; of research partnership; of competition with the USA; of student mobility; and of declining funding per capita. The main assumptions made by U21 members were that cooperation was essential and that individual institutions' attempts at provision of e-education would fail. The joint venture with Thomson Learning was a key part of the future success of U21.

Professor Dalziel outlined the structure of U21 and U21 Global. Full membership details can be found at www.universitas.edu.au. In Professor Gilbert's own words:

"...U21, an international network of leading universities spanning North America, Europe, and East and South East Asia. Universitas 21 is in the final stages of negotiations with Thomson Learning, a major information-and-solutions company based in the United States, about the establishment of a global e-education enterprise to be named U21 Global.

The universities involved have been developing the concept for several years. They are taking great care to ensure that U21 Global will be exemplary in its standards. U21 will not offer any course or accredit any award that has not been validated and endorsed by U21 Pedagogica, an international quality assurance agency established by the Universitas 21 universities to operate at arm's length from U21 Global."

Professor Dalziel went on to say that U21 membership was by invitation, would be restricted to a maximum of 25 members and had an operating budget of \$25m, raised through membership. U21 became a company in 1999, with an office in Birmingham and a secretariat in Melbourne.

Member university rectors sat on the board. In addition to annual board meetings there were regular meetings of deans and librarians and there were student networks. However, staff and student exchange programmes witnessed only 2-3 projects each year between members. It was intended that benchmarking projects between members and mutual recognition of professional qualifications would increase the portability of the individual and facilitate cooperation with business and industry.

However, U21 Global would be the significant enterprise. Students would receive a U21 Global degree, validated as described. The certificate would include the crests (not compulsory to members) of those institutions who had invested with Thomson Learning and who had licensed their crest to use by a third party. U21 Global would draw teaching staff from across the membership.

The aim was to create structured international networking and collaboration. Revenue streams would be diversified and institutions positioned internationally through enhanced reputations supported by benchmarking and quality assurance.

Points raised under Q&A

Executive Heads (particularly from the sub-continent) expressed concern about the composition of the membership. It emerged that, as it happens, the idea of U21 had been conceived at the ACU Conference of Executive Heads in Malta in 1996, when a number of like-minded Vice-Chancellors from institutions with similar structures and research interests had got together in an act of serendipity, driven by issues such as declining funding per student, government accountability and the clear opportunity of benchmarking internationally. U21 had subsequently invited other members to join to make up the present group (e.g. with China present to complement Hong Kong). It was suggested that other networks e.g. within South Asia could do likewise and form a group. It was reiterated that, for fear of loss of focus, U21 would not exceed 25 members but it was conceded that the executive would re-consider this option within three years. In answer to a query about what would happen with a change of executive head to someone with a different philosophy, it was made clear that no benchmarking of this 'like-mindedness' was envisaged.

The main conceptual issue for executive heads from the North regarded the partnership with Thomson Learning and the necessary resources that each university would need to commit. Professor Dalziel confirmed that the U21/T.L. relationship was still a point of question among members, particularly in the context of what each partner brought to the table and to future marketing strategy. Reference was made to the news that two prominent members, Toronto and McGill, had pulled out from talks with Thomson Learning and that M.I.T. had planned to post teaching material free online.

U21 had agreed a business plan with its board. The benchmarking programmes would be specific i.e. they would be more than a support group facility for its members. A marketing function to take entrepreneurial advantage of global distance learning markets was not conceded directly, though U21 did view that distance learning provision could not be met efficiently by individual institutions.

U21 members would continue to engage in, and to run, exchanges with non-U21 universities. Intellectual property generated through U21 would be made available to the wider academic community and U21 was not therefore in conflict with the 'globalisation of knowledge'.

U21 would need to earn its “pulling power” and develop a brand image behind the weight of its members. Degrees would be launched first in Hong Kong and Singapore, with about 200 students in the first year.

Asked what the very large budget would support (each university put in at least \$0.5m), Professor Dalziel referred to the business plan, which was long term and saw the first courses being provided online at post-graduate level to meet the demand for lifelong learning. She went on to outline the board and academic council structure of U21 Pedagogica, which boasts representation drawn from U21 and Thomson Learning as well as independently. The legal position of U21 Global will depend partly on where U21 is ultimately registered; though the plan is that the degree should be equivalent to 1/18th of a degree from each member and recognised in member countries as the equivalent of a full degree from any member. The institutions would be considered as enablers rather than direct providers, with staff drawn from them and appointed by U21. Courses would be mainly through online learning.

N.B. Since the session, University of Toronto has withdrawn entirely from U21, citing as its reason that it could not remain part of U21 whilst declining to join U21 Global, which would/might (depending on the legal interpretations) have rights to use its crest.