

Corporate – Higher Education Alliance

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INTRODUCTION

As a form of Corporate – Higher Education Alliance (“Alliance”), Bridge-eLearning (www.bridge-elearning.com) is a consortium (“Consortium”) that was created in May 2004. Its purpose is the advancement of e-learning content and practices within the corporate and higher education worlds. The project design intent was to build a more effective bridge between these two worlds and to foster high value by assembling a small number of members from Europe and North America. The ambition of this not-for-profit consortium was moderate. Pragmatic and attainable objectives were set for the initial three-year plan. A balanced collaborative business model is based on investment from each of the consortium members; and common values such as fairness, trust, collaboration and risk sharing are fostered among all members.

BACKGROUND

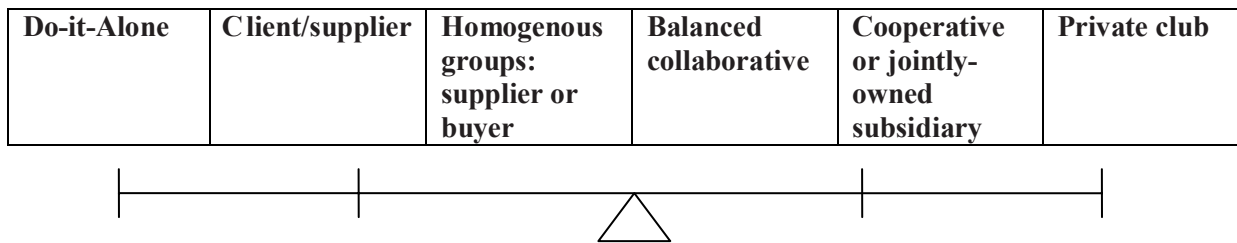
This article discusses corporate learning needs and an innovative way for corporations to tap into higher education’s reservoir of research-based knowledge through e-learning. It also covers the trend of universities establishing closer partnerships such as consortial arrangements with corporations for research and educational purposes. With e-learning as its underpinning, this paper addresses the general problems of

- Know-how required for course development success and risk mitigation,
- Availability of quality bilingual, and by extension multilingual, content, and
- Collaboration challenges among dissimilar entities.

When the Consortium was founded in 2004, e-learning (i.e. Web-based learning) was just evolving from the early adopter to the early majority life cycle stage, both in corporations where it is considered one of the training mechanisms and in universities where the perceptions of its use varied widely. Corporate – higher education e-learning alliances already existed and had identified recurrent challenges for the future of e-Learning, namely the increase of global partnerships between corporate and academia and the creation of new norms for e-Learning objects or modules of short duration to meet the learner’s needs for improved performance (Wentling, 2000). Topical literature review outlined key e-learning trends such as demand for training from high-skills workers, impact of technology on modes and quality of learning and innovative business models for public-private partnerships. Implications of such trends for Human Resources Directors included finding out how e-Learning will modify their practice. Implications also meant for each stakeholder – i.e. business, academia, professional associations and government - to be cognizant of each other’s efforts and to cooperate in order to find solutions to the general problems stated above (Waight, 2002).

Higher education faced a number of critical challenges, such as addressing lifelong learning, establishing virtual universities and building strategic alliances with each other and the corporate sector (Hanna, 2003; Heywood, 2000). As emerging trends were reported, such as the massive introduction of information and communication technologies, internationalization, and the importance of promoting the principles of co-operation, partnership and mutual respect in higher education, adequate funding surfaced as a critical issue for universities with potential negative impacts on their research mission. Institutions were thus encouraged to diversify funding sources (UNESCO, 2004; Fields, 2006). With the number of corporate universities exceeding 50% of the accredited universities in the United States, the

Figure 1. Schematic of Asymmetrical and Balanced Alliance models



choice for academia between partnering or risking obsolescence was clear; the potential for e-learning delivered content aligned to business needs of large captive audiences was being grasped by early adopters (Meister, 2003; AACSB, 2002). These institutions saw that distance education through e-learning might represent the best growth in enrollments for most institutions (Lokken, 2006).

Conceptually, alliances can take multiple forms in the pursuit of a research, educational and/or business service goal that is associated with an emerging technology such as e-learning.

As proposed in the schematic of Alliance models in Figure 1, at one end of the spectrum of possibilities, a very large corporation or a well-funded university could act alone in undertaking e-learning programs development, i.e. with no collaboration, no sharing and stand-alone investment. (Do-it-alone, no alliance scenario). As a slight variation, a corporation could contract a university to provide custom e-learning programs, i.e. a minimalist form of alliance (Client/Supplier scenario) (Meister, 2003). Moving along the continuum, universities might create an alliance to provide joint e-learning programs to industry (Homogenous supplier group) (ADEC, 2006; Universitas, 2007); similarly corporations could create a joint buying group to aggregate and contract their requirements to universities (Homogenous buyer group). At the other end of the spectrum, a number of universities with or without corporations, could create a cooperative (www.merlot.org) or a jointly-owned subsidiary that would act as the development arm of e-learning programs for a sponsor group, with optional marketing to external clients (Jointly-owned subsidiary scenario) (Universitas, 2007). Furthermore, a group similar to a private club could aim to be self-sufficient in the demand and supply of e-learning programs and be closed to outsiders.

Other Views on Corporate-Higher Education Alliances

Despite dozens of innovative learning technologies, online courseware has not always provided rich, interactive learning experiences. Thus, there is a persistent need for advice and know-how transfer about how to create exciting and relevant online materials (Bonk, 2004).

Alliances have also been created with an educational purpose ranging from (1) accreditation of corporate training programs to (2) jointly-developed customized degrees or non-accredited courses to (3) creation of a new degree program (Meister, 2003; Universitas, 2007). Alliances can involve a single corporation and a single academic institution, a local/regional grouping of corporations and academia, a sectoral grouping of corporations plus academia or a global grouping of same (Meister, 2003; Allen, 2002). The criteria used by corporations to select universities for an alliance or partnership range from geographical proximity, alumni or trustee involvement of the corporation's executives, and/or a formal list of defined factors (AACSB, 1998; Meister, 2003).

Alliances can help alleviate the most important factor that prevents postsecondary institutions from expanding distance education courses, i.e. program development costs (Waits, 2003).

E-learning and virtual universities were not seen by all as a progressive trend towards a new era. Some considered e-learning as a regressive trend towards the rather old era of mass-production, standardization and purely commercial interests (Noble, 1998). Arguments against alliances revolve around issues such as providing no improvement in a university's ability to play a vital role in the online market and further ero-

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