

Introduction

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WITHIN THE LAST TWO DECADES the traditional international associations of universities, such as the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the UNESCO-based International Association of Universities, have been complemented by a new wave of smaller, more homogeneous groupings. These newer ‘international networking alliances’ or ‘international consortia’ of universities have a variety of origins and purposes. Some began by focussing on student exchange, others on collaboration in research. Some are specific to a particular region, such as Europe or Latin America, while the membership of others is more global. Most are groupings of institutions that see themselves as having particular characteristics in common—groupings of open universities, technological universities, innovative universities or universities located in capital cities, for example.

Some international networking alliances and consortia of universities started with a media fanfare, but have not lived up to their founders’ expectations. They now limp along with a low level of activity, or have disbanded altogether. In others, however, collaboration between their member institutions has broadened and deepened. Such consortia are now seen by their proponents as mechanisms that help their members to understand and to adapt to changes in the wider world—in particular, to changes associated with information and communications technology, with internationalisation and globalisation, and with the ever more central roles played by knowledge creation and application in economic and social systems (Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotney et al. 2001). In a changing world, these international

networking alliances and consortia will, it is claimed, give their member universities a powerful competitive advantage—not least in their core activities of teaching, research and service.

Why have so many universities tried to set up, or to join, international institutional networks? Why have some networks failed and others succeeded? To what extent are successful networks fulfilling the large claims made by their proponents? This book attempts to answer such questions by looking at selected networks, and through case-studies of particular programmes and projects conducted by these networks.

The first chapter sets the scene with a descriptive analysis of changes in the environment of higher education institutions in recent decades. While some universities are among the oldest surviving institutions of the Western world, they have over the years undergone successive reforms in which their structure, purpose, social location or relationship to the state have been changed in a powerful way (Aitkin 1999). Peter Scott (1998) argues that today's universities are creatures not of medieval Europe but of the nation-state; however, an observer from even the middle of the twentieth century would be amazed by the changes of the last fifty years. Chapter 1 argues that profound changes have resulted during this period from the transition to mass higher education, and that equally profound changes are now occurring in higher education in response to globalisation.

Chapter 2 takes this analysis further, arguing that many universities are now seeking to respond to the pressures of globalisation through internationalisation. Hans de Wit observes that the recent emergence of international networks of higher education institutions is strongly linked to economic and academic rationales for internationalisation, rather than to the political and sociocultural rationales that were prominent during the Cold War period. He goes on to provide a typology of international networks of higher education institutions, identifies factors that lead to success or failure, and also identifies issues that are as yet unresolved concerning the further development of such networks.

Five pairs of chapters follow. The first chapter of each pair presents an account of a specific network, the second a case-study of a particular programme or project undertaken through that network. The chapters of each pair thus complement each other: the first provides an overview of the network as a whole, the second a more detailed examination of a specific mechanism through which a particular set of aims is to be achieved. This examination of specific programmes and projects helps to assess how, and to what extent, the aims of the network are operationalised.

The networks selected for inclusion in this book vary in important respects, including age and location. The two European networks are in their second decade of operation; two of the global networks have been

established more recently. The Association of Commonwealth Universities is much older.

Though all the networks now share the experience of operating in the early years of the twenty-first century, they carry with them, in their organisational cultures and *modus operandi*, traces of their origins and subsequent evolution. This is most obviously so in the case of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). As John Kirkland points out in Chapter 3, age has provided the ACU with widespread recognition, goodwill and prestige; but the common ground among the universities that led to its formation in 1913 has since changed beyond all recognition. This case provides an illuminating example of continuity and change, and of current efforts to anticipate and respond to change in a way compatible with the founding ideals.

Chapters 5 and 7 focus on European networks. The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) was established in 1987; CLUSTER, a European consortium of universities of technology, in 1990. These two networks were founded at a time of developing integration in Western Europe. The push towards a common economic entity was being complemented by initiatives to create the conditions for a more mobile workforce, and also for a more recognisably 'European' cultural dimension. The European Commission provided financial support for inter-university co-operation in research and in student exchange, initially within Western Europe itself and, after 1990, in order to extend these links to universities in Central and Eastern Europe.

EADTU is unusual among networks in that it comprises several different categories of members. At its core are the open universities, but the membership also includes a much larger number of traditional universities that teach both at a distance and face-to-face. Most of these traditional universities are represented in EADTU through national associations. It is evident that the distinctive focus of EADTU, shared by all members—open and distance learning—has been sufficiently strong to retain in the one network a membership that is, in organisational terms, very diverse indeed.

CLUSTER is a smaller and more homogeneous grouping of eleven universities noted for high-level work in science and technology. As Rodolfo Zich and Carlo Naldi point out in Chapter 7, such universities are challenged by the loss of their *de facto* monopoly in higher education and by the disappearance of the barriers that formerly limited their audience. Yet these authors claim that globalisation offers many opportunities and benefits to universities that embrace change in a proactive way. They show how the operation of CLUSTER over the last decade has benefited its members in many ways and is now 'already acting as the "kernel" of a European University of Science and Technology'.

In 1993 the LEWI network (Chapter 9), which now comprises ten universities from Western countries and eighteen from East Asia, was established in Hong Kong. Unlike some other alliances, LEWI has a major focus in one institution, the Hong Kong Baptist University. The stated purpose is to increase intercultural understanding between East and West ‘through the involvement of an international membership in exchange activities and multi-disciplinary research’. This aim raises profound questions about the roles and social responsibilities of universities in confronting important issues of the twenty-first century (see Mayor 1995). But, just as the networks of European universities profiled in Chapters 5 and 7 reflect the wider European agenda for inter-European co-operation, so LEWI reflects the historical role and future aspirations of Hong Kong as a ‘bridge’ or ‘partner’ in interactions between mainland China and the West.

In 1997 Universitas 21, another network with a global reach, was founded. It now links seventeen comprehensive research-intensive universities in Australasia, East Asia, Europe and North America. As Chris Robinson explains in Chapter 11, Universitas 21 began as an idea for advancing the internationalisation objectives of its members, and is now a substantial organisation with its own structures, business plans and activities. Universitas 21 has received wide media coverage for its entrepreneurial activities, most notably the formation of a \$US50 million joint venture with Thomson Learning. This will provide members with opportunities to participate in the rapidly growing global market for Internet-based distance learning, and with a revenue stream independent of the uncertainties of public funding. But, as Robinson points out, such entrepreneurial initiatives complement two other categories of Universitas 21 activities: traditional academic exchanges and international collaborative activities. These collaborative activities are designed, like many activities of national university consortia, to gain efficiencies by generalising good practice, sharing resources and providing member universities with enhanced operating capabilities.

Complementing these five studies of institutional networks are five case-studies of programmes and projects undertaken by or through these networks. These programmes and projects represent international collaboration in research, course development and the use of new technologies in teaching, the exchange of students, the mutual recognition of academic awards, and benchmarking and quality enhancement.

As Robinson points out in Chapter 11, reductions in public funding and increasing demand for higher education threaten the quality and integrity of academic programmes. It is therefore not surprising that during the last decade governments in a number of jurisdictions have either subjected universities to new quality-assessment mechanisms or have extended

to previously self-accrediting universities quality-assessment mechanisms formerly only used in non-university higher education institutions. However, the imposition of quality-assurance mechanisms that fail to take account of the organisational complexities of universities (see Niland 1998) or fail to reinforce the high levels of professional responsibility that characterise most faculty members may well be counterproductive.

It is therefore encouraging to read, in Chapter 4, of two initiatives taken by the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service (CHEMS) to facilitate international benchmarking between Commonwealth universities and later between universities in Europe. The original plan was to review, over a four- or five-year cycle, all the key activities of university management. As Fielden points out, the prime purposes of benchmarking are to improve performance and to identify transferable lessons and practices. There is much to be learnt from these CHEMS initiatives about how such processes—developed originally for service industries—can be modified and developed for intelligent application in universities.

In Chapter 6, Kevin Wilson describes a project in which members of EADTU co-operated to produce an award-winning course entitled *What is Europe?* This course was then used by EADTU member institutions throughout Western Europe and further afield. The international collaboration through which this course was produced resulted in a product with desirable characteristics that could not have been produced by any one of the institutions acting alone. But it proved to be costly and, contrary to expectations, its success did not start a trend of international collaboration in the production of other courses. However, this lack of follow-up may, as Wilson points out, have been due to reasons other than cost. Recent applications of interactive communication technologies have led to alternative approaches to collaborative teaching and learning; so the emphasis is shifting from joint development of course materials towards joint teaching arrangements mediated by computer conferencing. The EADTU network has again come to the fore in exploring the potential of these new developments.

In Chapter 8, Michael Schlenker and Paolo Camurati describe the inner workings of a task force established to facilitate co-operation across the CLUSTER network in student and faculty exchange, the joint design of curricula, research collaboration and other areas. Considerable progress is reported, particularly in student exchange. But the authors acknowledge that it is difficult to distinguish between the effects of CLUSTER discussions and the effects of European Commission initiatives, such as ERASMUS, which placed student exchange high on the agenda of every European university. However, many academic and practical problems of student exchange among CLUSTER members have undoubtedly been solved, and

effective mechanisms have been put in place with added value for students and for employers. This case-study points to the importance both of the optimal formal structure and composition of the task force, and of the quality of interaction between its members.

In Chapter 10, Ken Young addresses the issue of how best to encourage joint research, particularly in the social sciences, among faculty members from universities in the LEWI network. With members located on four continents, the problems are formidable; indeed, previous efforts to promote collaborative research within LEWI had achieved only partial success—a situation common to other institutional networking alliances. Young points out that recent advances in information and communication technologies, and associated innovations in organisational structures, have transformed the operation of global businesses and have much potential for facilitating international collaboration between university-based researchers. However, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that university researchers will realise this potential, since the factors that influence their actions differ in important ways from those that drive businesses. In 1999 LEWI set up three virtual research centres: the chapter provides the rationale for this development, and an assessment of progress to date.

As Michael Goldberg and Chris Robinson observe in Chapter 12, globalisation has created an unprecedented demand for increasingly skilled workforces, but international mobility of professionals is hindered unless they have qualifications that permit them to practise in several jurisdictions. Universitas 21 aims to develop international curricula to provide graduates for a global professional workforce with credentials that are internationally portable. As a first step, the Professional Portability Project focussed on the needs of one profession, building a generic, transferable curriculum. This agreement in accounting provides a useful template for other fields, and the authors consider which fields might benefit most from this kind of approach.

Chapter 13 illustrates in a striking manner the fact that networking alliances of universities do not exist independently of one another. Just as it is common for a university to have bilateral agreements for co-operation with different partner organisations for different purposes, so some universities have joined several different networking alliances. Here de Wit provides accounts of the evolution of two networking alliances, one European and the other global. The Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA), founded in 1990, has expanded and diversified its membership, with the result that it now serves somewhat different purposes for different members. The League of World Universities (LWU) founded in 1991, also focusses on problems and challenges faced by universities located in major urban centres.

De Wit concludes his analysis of the aims and activities of these two networks, through their first decade, by observing:

In the end, the two networks had to reduce their ambitions, from interactive networks of higher education institutions involved in a broad range of joint teaching and research activities, to information networks. Size, diversity, unclear missions, too little commitment within the institutions and different educational cultures and systems are all factors influencing this limited result.

But four universities that are members both of UNICA and of LWU have recently decided to form a smaller alliance with more focussed collaboration in carefully defined areas.

As de Wit's analysis makes clear, the search goes on for models of collaborative action that will enable universities to survive and prosper in changing times. Without doubt, for reasons that are explored in chapters 1 and 2, international collaboration will assume even greater importance in the years ahead. And, as the subsequent chapters illustrate, the leaders of many universities see international networking alliances and consortia as keys to the future success of their institutions. These studies reveal considerable diversity—between networks established at different times, under different circumstances and for different purposes. But, sharing the global environment, they also have much in common. Close scrutiny of these cases will help all who are concerned with the problems and opportunities of international collaboration between universities in the twenty-first century.