

***“Building a High Quality Global e-Learning Network: Lessons,
Pitfalls and Opportunities from Universitas 21 Global”***

By

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I. Introduction and Purpose

Universitas 21 Global was formed initially by 16 internationally focused comprehensive research universities to provide a laboratory for online learning and to provide the highest quality learning to underserved populations globally. Accordingly, the paper will provide the background and history for the U21Global collaborative experiment in online learning. It will also cover lessons learned during the four years that U21Global has been operation including what we have learned about strategies to support a common platform for ‘internationalising’ education in the online medium. Both progress and pitfalls will be discussed as are our processes and criteria vis-à-vis quality assurance and benchmarking and some of the innovative frameworks that have been developed at U21Global for managing quality processes in our open online learning environment. The paper also touches on issues of democracy, student-centred approaches to learning, and international collaboration and cooperation in the e-learning space that U21Global has experienced. Also explored in the paper are opportunities for the future to enhance online learning and expand its scope and scale internationally. A major focus of the paper will be the importance of cooperation between and among U21Global and its parent universities, which has provided U21Global with unique and powerful opportunities to bring very high quality graduate program learning experiences to learners globally. The experience suggests that focusing on and committing to deep cooperation and quality are key elements differentiating U21Global and underpin its successes to date. The paper concludes with new paths and ideas that build on successes and overcome problem areas that have been identified during the past four years. These paths largely rest upon increasingly numerous and creative links with U21 universities.

II. Background and history of U21Global

a. The Universitas 21 Network Introduced

Universitas 21 was founded at the University of Melbourne in 1997 as an international network of leading research-intensive universities in order to foster collaboration and cooperation among its members and seize diverse opportunities that no single institution acting on its own would be able to realize. Universitas 21 comprises 17 universities in 9 countries with an aggregate student enrolment of roughly 500,000 students, employing together some 40,000 academics and researchers and with over 2 million alumni collectively. At the second annual meeting held in 1998 a set of 10 foundational projects was identified to get the consortium launched on meaningful and valued collaborative activities. Cooperation

in e-learning and internal U21 quality assurance were foremost among these 10 inaugural projects (Teather, 2004). In 2001, these initiatives led to the creation of U21Global, the online learning group, and U21 Pedagogica, the quality assurance body respectively as set out below.

b. The late 1990s dot.com era: The context for U21Global

The late 1990s were not only the launch pad for Universitas 21 they were also the dot.com bubble era. There was a great deal of excitement and optimism about the prospects of online learning, as a way to save costs, improve access to universities and reach previously underserved populations, while also to bringing universities and their pedagogies into the then looming 21st century and delivering programs through private and often for-profit universities in direct competition with the public and non-profit institutions that came to dominate and define university education (Thompson, 1998).

The following figure from Keyworth (1999) nicely depicts the hoped for positioning of comprehensive university e-learning efforts in the broad international education space. It demonstrates their previously implicit commitment to quality at the

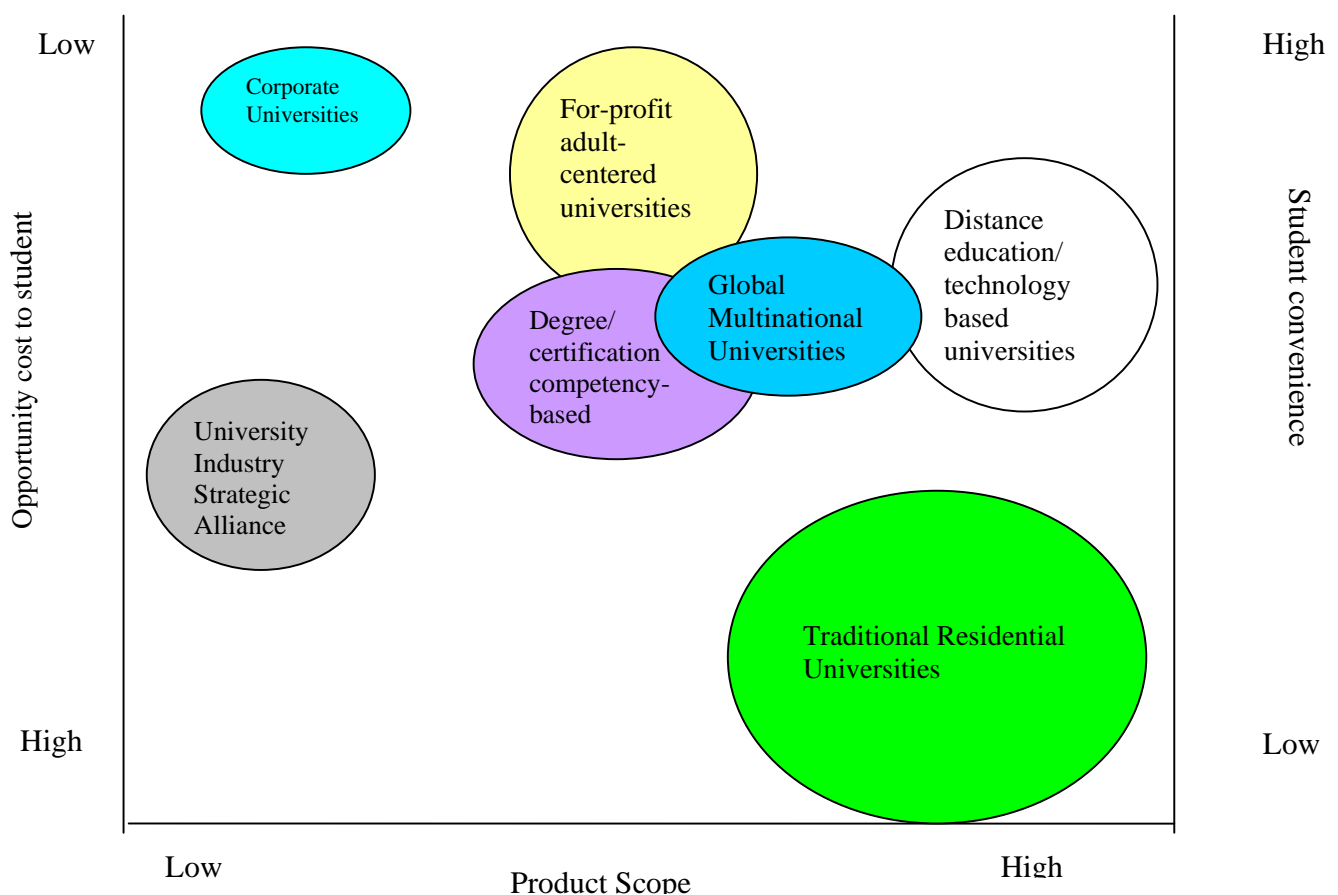


Figure1: Strategic Group Map for higher education (From Keyworth, 1999)

expense of convenience, a dimension not typically considered by traditional comprehensive research universities.

Introducing this new student-based dimension changes the competitive landscape considerably with the strategic group map adding a new dimension—convenience. In this new competitive setting lower quality mass educators who were previously at a competitive disadvantage now find themselves with some distinct and valued attributes improving their ability to meet broad student learning needs that include convenience. By moving beyond the traditional dimensions of educational quality as set by leading research based universities to include demand side attributes of quality (i.e., convenience or opportunity cost) the competitive environment changes considerably and opens up significantly to new educational suppliers using new delivery and support systems. Figure 2 illustrates this form of strategic group map and is useful for showing where U21Global is positioning itself in the worldwide higher education marketplace.

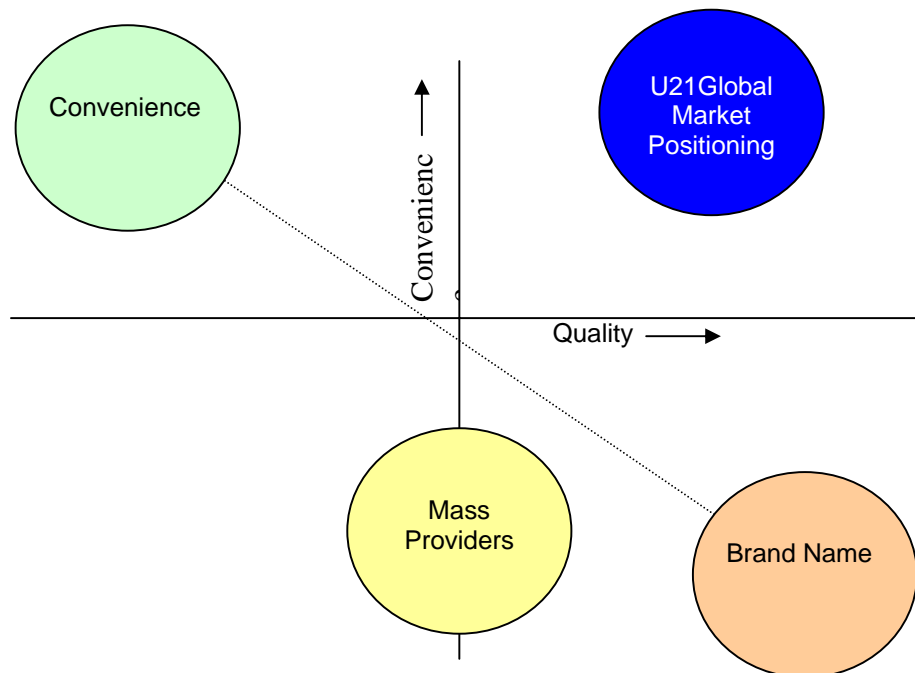


Figure 2: Strategic Group Map for higher education by taxonomic classification (Adapted from Keyworth, 1999)

Seen in the context of Figure 2 it is clear why there was such euphoria for early for e-learning efforts which not only reflected the enthusiasm and optimism of the era for virtually anything that was web-based and IT facilitated but also the ability of e-learning to attack large niches in this new more broadly defined competitive space (Massey and Curry, 1999; Cardean University, 2005; Curry, Neill, Galan, and Harasim, 1999; and Drew, 1999). Such innovators as NYU Online, Morningside Ventures, UNext, the UK Virtual University, Western Governors University and

numerous others did not live up to the promises made by their initiators. In many of these early online cases, the pedagogy was fully developed and courseware often consisted of little more than putting text materials, class lecture notes and overheads online. This was a direct extension of the traditional *instructivist* approach to learning practiced in the classroom, where learning was instructor led and students were very much followers. Knowledge continued to be imparted by faculty members, albeit online. The great *constructivist* power of online learning was thus not harnessed in these early e-learning efforts where students are active learners and *construct* knowledge from the materials and discussions online with their student colleagues and with the faculty facilitator. Indeed, many offerings being created today still do not follow a constructivist learning paradigm and instead continue to rely on the passive instructivist approaches typical of much of traditional classroom teaching.

Finally, the early expectations of lower costs, mass scalability and great improvements in access were also not met: Well facilitated online learning is actually quite faculty-intensive and neither low cost nor hugely scalable; and greatly improved access to education was predicated on the assumption of good access to the web and implicitly on very high levels of motivation by learners to set aside the time and organise their work and family lives to in order to learn online.

c. Universitas 21 Global: bringing these foci together

Universitas 21 Global was born out of the twin caldrons of the dotcom and e-learning frenzies and the globalisation of university and indeed all levels of education. As noted earlier, creating a U21 online learning cooperative was upper most in the minds of participants at the second Annual General Meeting of U21 Vice-Chancellors (Presidents, Rectors, Principals, etc.) in 1998. It was felt that e-learning was a globe girdling activity and could liberate U21 universities from the spatial limitations of their own physical campuses giving them collectively global reach, something impossible separately or from a traditional campus base. Additionally, it was clear that online learning would require substantial resources to get started and that the resources available to any single university would be insufficient. Indeed, as it turned out the collective resources of the U21 universities were inadequate as well for the launching of an online cooperative venture and laboratory for the universities so that a private sector partner (Thomson Learning) had to be brought on as a 50% owner of the eventual Universitas 21 Global Pte Ltd (U21G hereinafter) online learning joint venture as it became formally known.

Accordingly, in 2001, U21G was created through a formal set of agreements between the U21 universities and Thomson Learning. A key part of the agreement, and a significant differentiating factor from previous online learning consortia, was the ongoing and full involvement of the sponsoring universities in the assurance of quality of U21G activities. Accordingly, Universitas 21 Pedagogica (U21p) was simultaneously created with U21G. U21p is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Universitas 21 consortium and is based at the University of Virginia in the United

States. It is charged with ensuring the quality of student admission standards, faculty, course content and online courseware and student assessment standards.

This central involvement of the U21 universities in U21G evolution provides U21G with a major academic and competitive boost. As we will see shortly, U21G is able to draw on the research and learning strengths of the now 18-member U21 consortium. Novel joint programs can be, and are, thus developed with the U21 member universities combining their content, and pedagogy with U21G online content and pedagogy and to offer students worldwide a growing and exciting array of graduate degrees and certificates built on the best of traditional learning and U21G advances.

The partnerships between U21G and U21 institutions are proving to be significant benefits to both. The early vision of U21G as an online laboratory and hothouse for the U21 network is being realized. Additionally, much of U21G innovation is coming from its growing web of links to U21 schools and to the U21 network as a whole. U21G is thus able to benefit both from innovations in e-learning pedagogy, content and technology and from the power and evolution of the U21 network. This combination is proving to be a unique strength of U21G and itself a novel experiment in cooperation in online learning, pedagogy, research and innovation.

III. Learning and Pedagogy at Universitas 21 Global

Universitas 21 Global was created by its owners to provide online graduate programs of quality equivalent to those offered by its parent universities on their campuses. During its scant five years of operation, the global learning environment has changed dramatically, and U21G has changed significantly as well to accommodate these changes while keeping true to its quality commitment and its role as an e-learning laboratory for the U21 consortium.

a. The planned and actual evolution of U21G

The initial model for U21G was very much rooted in the ethos of the late 1990s dotcom boom. U21G was seen as having a first (or at least very early) mover advantage with economies of scale accruing to the learning software and hardware platforms. Low delivery costs and rapidly growing high student numbers were foreseen as a result. Brand advantage was seen as deriving from the very high quality of the courseware and programs resulting from the active backing of the initial 16 universities who had agreed to allow their crests to appear on the U21p approved degree, diploma and certificate program *testamurs* (award certificates).

Not surprisingly, the actual evolution of U21G programs has been quite different and is still occurring. Quality in its diverse aspect has emerged as the defining feature of U21G programs. Admission standards were reasonably high to begin with and have been tightened consistently. Rigorous and very high quality courseware content, navigability and ease of engagement with the courseware have also emerged as hallmarks of U21G. Scalability has been lower than initially expected, but student networking and interaction have been vastly higher than originally thought

achievable. In the early development of U21G the concept of it serving as a U21 consortium e-learning collaborative and laboratory, was lost and replaced by the necessity of building a viable organisation quickly and having it focus on developing courseware, a strong faculty and staff cadre, attracting students, and getting its courseware and standards approved by U21p.

However, in the past year U21G is returning to the primary conception of being closely linked with its U21 parents and with the U21 network more generally. U21G brand building is also a dynamic exercise. While the original notion was to build the U21G brand on the strength of the 16 university crests appearing on the testamur, it is increasingly apparent that there is a parallel need to develop the brand through joint programs with individual U21 institutions or with groups of U21 institutions through reciprocal academic credit arrangements, articulation paths and joint or dual degree or certificate awards. The U21 network and a majority of the parent universities have shown considerable enthusiasm for such cooperation and numerous joint ventures are evolving as this paper is being written, with a number already finalized and launched.

U21G has also gone outside the U21 network and U21p to get its quality assessed. In early Fall 2005, it was accredited by the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) through the EFMD Certification in E-Learning (CEL) program. It has also built up formidable courseware development standards, a rigorous three week online faculty training program, a network of more than 100 faculty members, and some 1300 students since its first course offering in August 2003.

Consequently, U21G is now on quite solid ground, moving forward to explore new programs beyond the MBA and Master of Information Systems Management (MISM) degrees it currently offers. Masters degrees in Population Health and Public Sector Management are actively being planned for development in 2006. A major research initiative focusing on online learning and pedagogy with the U21 and on behalf of the U21 consortium is also to be developed for 2006. In short, U21G is back on track to be the e-learning collaborative and laboratory it was originally envisioned to be.

b. Learning at U21G

The foregoing set out the history and evolution of U21G. It did not delve into the values and characteristics of the U21G learning and pedagogical environments though, which we do now, since the learning and pedagogical environments are a focus of enormous energy and resources, and are increasingly what is defining the U21G learning experience.

To start, U21G committed itself at the outset to a learner-centred, faculty-facilitated learning pedagogy and environment. This approach has been continually refined, strengthened and reinforced through actual experience and through keeping abreast of and adapting advances in online and classroom pedagogy. A great deal has also been gleaned from feedback from both learners and their employer.

The pedagogical approach is very much one tailored for busy and working adult learners. It is unabashedly constructivist in its philosophy with its problem solving focus that draws heavily from and builds directly on the strengths and experiences of students and their actual current work issues and problems. There is also a strong focus on “constructive alignment” between the learning experience and student assessment, where assessment is based on student contributions to discussion boards, team projects, problem solving and ultimately on an “open book open web” (OBOS) final examination which poses a workplace problem and gives students 24-hours to solve it and make their recommendations. This “authentic” assessment regime provides students with evaluations of their capacity to frame questions or problems effectively, gather the information needed to solve them, craft creative solutions and above all communicate these solutions to colleagues and superiors productively and effectively (Williams, 2004; and Fitzsimmons and Williams, 2005). Accordingly, the learning environment is one of very high touch and interaction with class sizes limited to 40-45 students. The entire action learning approach is geared to engage the student audience which is 100% employed, is 36 years old on average, averages 10 years of managerial experience, 83% of whom travel at least twice per month, and all of whom must balance learning with work, family, and travel.

c. Core elements and values of the learning environment

i. Agent for Democracy: both in the “classroom” and in society

With some 1300 students from 50 countries, the U21G learning environment is clearly global in reach. As many colleagues note, online learning is the most democratic form of learning since everyone has an equally loud and powerful voice in discussion boards and threads, in projects and project group discussion threads, and in asking questions of faculty members. The asynchronous online learning context is equally welcoming to learners regardless of their gender, religion, personality (i.e., extrovert or introvert), and social standing. The online environment allows learners to reflect on comments by their peers and faculty facilitator and respond in an appropriate manner when they are comfortable that they have mastered the gist of the online discussion and have assembled material and ideas that advance the discussion. Asynchronous learning does not demand speed or a loud voice, it requires and allows appropriate and thoughtful responses unlike the typical classroom exchange which is all too often dominated by 3 or 4 alpha males, who may or may not actually have anything to contribute, but who are energetic and frequently reasonably aggressive in the classroom setting.

The reach of online learning (U21G designs its courseware for as little as 56k modem bandwidth) is also a forceful agent for democracy providing as it does greatly improved and merit-based access to high quality advanced learning that is usually only available in large cities and in reasonably wealthy societies. Discussion boards and project groups comprised of students from many countries and industries also add greatly to a student’s experience and understanding of globalisation and of the practice of global virtual teams and the need to accommodate diverse national and religious holidays and equally diverse cultural

and work practices. The learning environment builds on, fosters, and celebrates cultural identities and differences and promotes friendships and contact networks across the world that would be essentially impossible to develop for most participants. These knowledge networks promote global understanding and global citizenship and break down barriers of ignorance and parochialism that typify classroom learning in the vast majority of universities except the most prestigious and international, which are also the most expensive and most difficult to attend. Thus, online learning can indeed be an enormously potent force for democracy and democratic ideas both in the online “classroom” and more broadly in the societies touched by the online learning domain.

ii. Ethical issues in telematic learning

There are two separable sets of ethical issues to be identified. The first relates to the ethical conduct of learners, while the second is broader and relates to the ethical conduct of online telematic learning providers.

Starting with learners, the ethical issues faced by online or telematic learners are no different from those faced by learners in the traditional classroom. Cooperation among students is strongly encouraged and seen as a strong virtue. However, cheating in all of its forms is clearly not acceptable whether relating to examinations, discussion postings, or team or individual projects. Plagiarism and using substitute learners are unacceptable and harshly dealt with in the U21G learning context (Williams, 2005). A variety of high tech and low tech tools discourage such behaviour including using online plagiarism checking services, evolving forensic software that can discern writing style differences in relatively small written fragments such as those appearing on discussion boards and examinations, and peer assessment of contributions to group assignments. A clear statement of student responsibilities and ethical standards is presented to all students at the outset of their studies and forms the basis for the ethical behaviours that are expected of all students.

The second set of ethical issues relating to e-learning, are those confronting the e-learning provider. Here the issues are those faced by all global businesses such as ensuring that no bribes or other corrupt business practices are engaged in. Also, all prospective and enrolled students must be provided with full and fair disclosure about all of the fees, demands on their time and intellect, the rules they must accept during their tenure as students. Additionally, especially in countries and regions with new and evolving tertiary education systems, the online learning provider should act and be seen to act as an adjunct to locally available learning, not as a threat and competitor to nascent tertiary learning institutions. The online learning provider thus must be sensitive to local learning context and add to its capacity, not weaken it.

iii. Teachers and students

Given the constructivist and problem-solving pedagogy of U21G, great effort is expended to avoid using the word “teacher.” Faculty members responsible for supervising actual class sections are called “faculty facilitators” in keeping with their

facilitative and guiding role. With the focus on learners and learning faculty members do not “lecture” or “teach” online but rather guide and facilitate learning through their interventions in discussion boards, group projects, supplementary learning materials that complement online courseware, and of course through their responding to student and group queries. They are also responsible for fostering, and if need be enforcing an open, participatory and egalitarian learning environment. These are time-consuming responsibilities and quite different from those of the traditional instructivist university teacher, and they are a necessary and vital element of the learning atmosphere at U21G. Thus, while the U21G online faculty member has very different responsibilities from those of the typical classroom teacher, they are equally important, fundamental and active contributors to the success of the U21G learners.

iv. Technology

Technology is first, foremost and always a tool to facilitate learning at U21G. Technological innovations that do not add significantly to the learning experience of students are not adopted. Learning and communication technologies that are unstable or risky are not employed. When potentially useful new technologies are identified, they are piloted first by the faculty with the help of a very strong technology team. They are then experimented with in one class section. If students felt that technology did indeed add to their learning and was easy to master and completely reliable, a broader experiment of several class sections will be tried before the technology is made available to all U21G students. This has proven to be a very good way to tame technology and ensure that it is always a means to a learning end, and never an end in and of itself.

v. Developing countries

One of the initial goals of the U21 universities in establishing U21Global was to improve access to high quality graduate education in rapidly developing nations with underserved populations of learners. The location of the U21G head office in Singapore reflects this desire to serve the vast Asian region and its huge and burgeoning graduate learning needs. Discussions within the U21 network to add a university in Southern Africa and one in Latin America will further enhance the ability of U21G to serve these two underserved regions of the world.

With the growing power, flexibility and range of wireless telecommunication technology, the much feared “Digital Divide” is becoming less of a barrier to near universal online learning than originally feared a decade ago. Moreover, improvements in data compression technology and the 56k design of U21g courseware imply that developing countries will indeed be able to take advantage of advances in online learning being pioneered at U21G and at other online learning institutions around the world.

vi. Quality assurance

Concerns about the quality of online university programs have confronted the sector since its inception. Initially, online learning was seen as a natural addition to

distance and continuing education delivery systems to take advantage of advances in information and telecommunication technology. Distance and its close ally continuing education were frequently viewed as inferior educational goods. Online learning thus inherited the stigma associated with much distance and continuing education, despite the pedigree of many of the academic institutions that backed early e-learning ventures. Quality online learning was seen as an oxymoron.

Accordingly, creating high quality online learning with learning outcomes equivalent to that found in leading research universities was a challenge pedagogically and technically. It was even more of a challenge in recruiting first rate students, who had to be convinced that online learning was not synonymous with poor quality.

It is not surprising given the parentage of U21G that quality was foremost in the minds of U21G faculty and staff. This extended to building the highest quality online courseware, ensuring high quality student admissions systems, student service systems and processes, means to recruit and retain high quality faculty while also creating continuous quality improvement mechanisms.

Quality assurance began with Universitas 21 Pedagogica as noted earlier. It then became part of the U21G culture at all levels. Most recently it has taken the form of CEL Certification in E-Learning and in the future it will take different forms as U21G and its faculty, staff and students continue to learn and evolve. With CEL certification, U21G will be an active participant in other CEL efforts and thus will be positioned to learn from the best in e-learning practices.

Most important in this vein is the proposal to establish a U21 Research Centre on Online Learning and Pedagogy housed at U21Global in Singapore on behalf of the entire U21 network. Creation of this Centre will allow U21g and U21 universities more generally to conduct advanced research in online learning that will allow online learning to continue to improve as a learning environment. The Centre will allow U21G to meet its early goal of becoming a learning laboratory for online learning. It will also enable U21G to continue to improve its learning environment as research results flow from the Centre and from associated activities at the U21 universities as well. Armed with such research capacity and findings U21G should be in a position to continue on its path to becoming the premier quality online graduate institution worldwide.

vii. Contents and Courseware

Because of its importance and its central role in quality learning, the courseware content and online delivery development systems at U21G deserve their own brief discussion below. U21p set the original standards for content review and development at U21G. This has subsequently been advanced by U21G's own courseware development standards both with respect to content and to the online form the content ultimately takes. U21G has amassed and documented a great deal of experience in hiring and guiding content authors to create the content for its courseware. It has also developed detailed specification manuals and guides for the

software teams that translate the content into engaging yet challenging online learning materials that are at the heart of the U21G learning environment. The learner is always front of mind in this integrated courseware development and review process. Animations, video and audio clips, diverse graphical and tabular material, self assessment questions complete with ideal answers, interactive learning tools, and numerous links to online libraries and references round out the courseware design.

All of the courseware is SCORM compliant and imbedded in the latest version of the WebCT learning management system (LMS). Continuous and mandatory feedback from students and faculty alike on the course provide ongoing information with which to continuously improve the content and the online courseware.

IV. Lessons Learned

U21G has made many missteps and taken some wrong and sometimes costly decisions. Throughout however, the commitment the learner and to improving and learning from these mistakes (and the successes too) has driven the ongoing efforts on courseware development, faculty recruiting, training and retention, student admissions and services and forging a culture of excellence. On reflection therefore the major lessons learned include the following.

First, cooperation and partnership with U21 parent universities is absolutely critical. The initial two years of U21G development was achieved independent of the parent universities. This proved problematic since the wealth of knowledge, pedagogical skills, technical capacity and networks resident in the parent universities was not available to U21G. However, in the past year this has changed significantly and the cross-fertilization between the diverse universities and U21G is bearing valuable fruit in the form of innovative joint programs, building the U21G brand, and expanding the geographic and intellectual scope of U21G efforts, and helping to achieve the initial goal of becoming a U21 laboratory for the online learning space.

A second powerful lesson has been the wisdom of focusing on the learner and learning environment. This has provided invaluable guidance on the choices of pedagogies, technologies, courseware content and faculty. In short, if a decision is good for the learner and enhances the learning environment it is either taken outright or strongly considered. If a decision will adversely affect the learner and the learning environment it will not be taken.

Third, the parentage of U21G lying in 16 research intensive comprehensive universities imposed a quality focus that is turning out to be unique. The relationship with U21p has ensured that the quality standards of the owning universities have been embedded in U21G processes, courseware, faculty and most importantly culture. Thus, commitment to high quality in all facets of U21G activities is a further key to emerging and future success. It defines the U21G marketplace and internal drivers and has built credibility with large business and government organisations around the globe as well as securing the CEL certification.

Beyond these three lessons, U21G has realised that a great strength it has developed is being able to continuously learn from mistakes and successes, and as a corollary, to never be satisfied with the status quo in quality and breadth of offerings, in courseware development processes, and in all of the activities in which U21G is engaged.

On the technology side, the strategy of being technologically conservative and only employing technologies that enhance the learning environment has proven itself many times over as suggested technological innovations have proven unstable, costly or both. Finally, being active in domain (discipline) and pedagogical research has greatly enhanced the quality of offerings and pedagogy and provided a further vital point of contact with U21 university parents.

In sum, the rigors of a rapidly changing global educational environment and an even more quickly changing ICT environment have combined to put enormous and continuing pressure on U21G, and indeed other international education providers, to be flexible and to learn from past mistakes and seize the ever emerging opportunities presented by the rapidly shifting educational and technological environments. U21G has not only been able to do this, but it has evolved a culture that increasingly thrives on and values change, but change for its own sake. Rather there is a continuing search for new a better courseware, pedagogies, management and decision-making structures and of course technology will enhance the learning and work environment and which provide learners with superior learning outcomes.

V. Challenges and Opportunities Facing Online Learning and U21Global

Despite more than a decade of development, online learning is still very much in its infancy and thus a work in progress. While the ultimate configuration of a widely accepted online learning content and pedagogy environment may remain up in the air, what is clear already is that online learning has an enormous role to play in the learning experiences of virtually all learners in the future. Accordingly, we next explore some of the remaining challenges facing online learning in general and U21Global specifically, before going on to examine the opportunities that overcoming these challenges provide.

a. Challenges

There is little doubt at the end of 2005 that online learning is no longer a learning medium of the future: it has already established itself as a powerful medium. With the rapid advances in learning and ICT software (and ICT hardware too) online learning will only become more influential and prominent in the future. Pedagogical research and advances both in online and other learning environments will further spur online learning potency, access and acceptability.

The foregoing view, will with high probability prevail and become reality. More generally, it is highly likely that online or e-learning will simply be seen as learning in

the years and decades to come, just as “classroom” or “book” or “experiential” learning are viewed today simply just as forms of learning.

However, challenges remain. Among these are the widely held and lingering doubts about the quality and credibility of online, its relevance for the typical learner, and the technological demands it poses. Additionally, building a high quality brand in a mass market educational competitive space is not easy and has proven difficult to date. Also unproven so far is the ease with which online learning can be adapted and customised to meet the growing learning and competency needs of corporate and government institutions. Lastly, beyond branding issues *per se* there are also issues related to delivering high quality and readily accessible student, career and alumni services to online students.

U21Global faces all of these challenges and others including building its reputation and brand internationally, developing innovative pedagogies and uses of proven technology and working with parent universities. Accordingly, we conclude this section by exploring the opportunities that U21G enjoys and outline some of the ways in which these are being seized.

b. Opportunities: The Flip Side of the Challenges

To date, a high quality premium online graduate program brand has yet to emerge in the e-learning space that is in any way analogous to the elite traditional university brands. This will not be easy to do as noted above because of the initial difficulties that many online program providers faced in serving the new online environment. However, the opportunities that attend to the first successful online institution to fill the premium space are considerable, including premium pricing, attracting excellent students and faculty, and building greatly valued links with business and government organizations.

A unique advantage enjoyed by U21G is the opportunity to cooperate with U21 parent institutions and to build a powerful high quality brand with them. This is already emerging as a critical success factor for U21G and will likely be even more important in the future as U21G and its parent universities develop trusted and flourishing relationships to provide very high quality online and blended learning experience to individual students, corporations and governments.

Closely linked to the opportunities related to creating a high quality premium brand are those which are tied to developing and applying innovative pedagogies in combination with the creative use of stable, proven and highly functional evolving learning technologies. Here again, U21G has a capacity to build on its experience to date, on the pedagogical research of its parents and on their creative use of learning technologies as well.

Other opportunities exist in the provision of student, alumni and career services. The boom in online services in the career and job placement area offers a very solid base to include these services directly in the online learning environment with

obvious benefits for students and also for the institutions offering such services and for their reputation as learner responsive.

Finally, an enormous opportunity exists to present businesses and governments with vital solutions to their learning and training needs, both to improve the skills and competencies of their employees and to offer valued and important retention tools for the best and most promising employees. Such organisational learning partnerships are clearly a wave of the future as public and private sector institutions struggle with the demands of providing lifelong learning to equip their employees to compete in the rapidly changing knowledge economy. The online learning institution that gets this right and can meet the ongoing needs of such organisational clients can realise enormous sustained growth.

VI. Conclusion: Looking Ahead

The history of online learning, as with any new learning mode, has been uneven with significant successes and failures. What cannot be in doubt at this point is the utility and growing use of online environments. It also seems beyond doubt that these environments will grow in power, acceptability and use.

The evolution of U21Global typifies much of the experience in the online learning space to date. However, it also has some unique lessons with which to conclude. First, the full engagement by its parent universities provides U21G with a number of especially powerful advantages it is working diligently to realise. Second, its focus on learners and learning has resulted in very high retention rates and high levels of student satisfaction. Third, its high admissions standards and its globally rich and interactive pedagogy are producing learning experiences that rival face-to-face learning environments in its parent institutions. Fourth, producing an enriching and engaging online learning experience, particularly for adult working learners, is a complex undertaking. It requires building student service capacity, a stable and usable technology platform, and attention to student requests and problems.

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