

CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH E-LEARNING: ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

In the last few years, internationalization and globalization of higher education has been a well-discussed issue amongst scholars and practitioners in the field of higher education. Communication and information technologies represented by the Internet made the provision of higher education services across national borders possible. In the framework of the WTO/GATS negotiations, four modes of trading services are defined: Cross-border supply, consumption abroad, commercial presence, and presence of natural persons. Applying these four modes to educational services, cross-border supply in educational services refers to international e-learning in which neither the education provider nor the student moves. The consumption abroad refers to traditional study abroad programmes in which students travel abroad. The commercial presence refers to the establishment of branch offices in another country. The presence of natural persons involves educators travelling to another country to supply educational services.

This paper will examine four existing virtual universities that are created by consortia of universities across borders, namely, ASEAN Virtual Institute of Science and Technology (AVIST), Cardean University, Global University Alliance (GUA), and Universitas 21 Global. They are examined in terms of the sort of institutional arrangements made to offer a degree jointly by multiple institutions, how the issues of accreditation are handled and the services provided to students besides instruction.

Introduction

In the last few years, internationalization and globalization of higher education has been a well-discussed issue among scholars and practitioners in the field of higher education. Communication and information technologies represented by the Internet made the provision of higher education services across national borders possible and such political/economic pressures as the current WTO/GATS negotiations also facilitate globalization of higher education markets. According to OECD (2004), there are four approaches to internationalization and globalization of higher education are: to promote mutual understanding between different countries; to attract skilled workers in a globalised economy; to generate additional revenues by higher education institutions; or to build a more educated workforce.

In the framework of the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services (WTO/GATS) negotiations, four modes of trading services are defined: Mode 1 (Cross-border supply), Mode 2 (Consumption abroad), Mode 3 (Commercial presence), and Mode 4 (Presence of natural persons). Applying these four modes to educational services, the Mode 1, cross-border supply, in educational services refers to international e-learning in which neither the education provider nor the student moves. The Mode 2, consumption abroad, refers to traditional study abroad programs in which students travel abroad. The Mode 3, commercial presence, refers to the establishment of branch offices in another country. The Mode 4, presence of natural persons, involves educators traveling to another country to supply educational services. The Mode 2 through 4 are rather traditional forms of trades in educational services, but the Mode 1 is the latest development made possible by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) such as the Internet.

The increasing demand of higher education in developing countries and shrinking domestic markets due to the decreasing number of youths in developed countries also propel higher education

institutions in developed countries, especially English-speaking countries, to export their services to overseas markets. In fact, more than half (54%) of all foreign students in the OECD countries are in the four leading English-speaking countries (i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada) (OECD, 2004). Cross-border higher education, not only in terms of international student mobility but also in terms of the mobility of educational programs and institutions, will also be expected to be dominated by the English-speaking countries.

As seen in Europe where a policy initiative called the Socrates-Erasmus program facilitates international student and program mobility and academic partnerships within 31 European countries, a number of higher education institutions in the world have started to collaborate to create programs that are attractive to students across borders. A newer form of cross-border supply of educational programs, namely cross-border e-learning, has been launched by many institutions, usually being combined with traditional classroom-teaching in local partner institutions. Those relationships between overseas institutions and local institutions take different forms and are regulated under a variety of arrangements. Virtual universities, in which a majority of classes are offered online for degree-granting purposes, have proliferated in the last several years, some of them were closed down after the dot-com bust while others still survive. Many virtual universities were created by consortia of traditional higher education institutions.

Consortia approach has many advantages as member institutions can share risks and share expertise and knowledge without jeopardizing their respective brand images. This paper will examine four existing virtual universities that are established by consortia of universities across borders; namely, U21 Global, Global University Alliance (GUA), Cardean University, and ASEAN Virtual Institute of Science and Technology (AVIST). Those virtual universities are examined in terms of: what sorts of institutional arrangements were made to offer a degree jointly by multiple institutions; and how they handle the issues of accreditation.

U21 Global

U21global is the joint venture between Universitas 21 and Thomson Learning, a subsidiary of the multinational publishing house Thomson Corporation. Universitas 21, whose name coming from the Latin word for university and the 21 century we are now in, was established by three Australian universities in 1997 initially to expand student and faculty exchanges. Its membership expanded to include 18 universities in 1999 from ten countries in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. In 1999, Universitas 21 decided to pursue commercial interests by incorporating itself. That was the first instance of a commercial consortium of universities across national borders.

Thomson Learning has given US\$25 million to the project and has been responsible for supplying U21global with textbooks, library services, and technological and administrative support, as well as recruiting faculty to create content and teach courses. The member institutions' involvement is limited to providing quality assurance and funding which is reported to be at least \$500,000 (Young 2001) with minimal involvement of their faculty. Diplomas are issued by the consortium, not by a member institution, bearing the names and logos of the member universities, though ironically the member universities have not recognized the U21global degrees. Because of this limited involvement in the development of the courses and in the assessment of the courses by faculty from member universities, faculty unions in five countries have protested their institutions' participation in U21global. There was also an incident of students in Australia protesting the plan, charging that the reputations of the institutions involved would be jeopardized. Two founding member institutions, the University of Toronto and the University of Michigan withdrew from the consortium in 2001 for concerns over the consortium's use of their names and logos (Maslen, 2001).

U21global began offering trial sessions of a component of its online MBA program in November 2002, and launched its first full program in May 2003, offering courses in accountancy, business, and IT, targeting mainly at Asian and Latin American markets. Courses are offered in English as well as in Chinese. In 2004, U21 was reported to have 400 students from 25 countries enrolled in their online

MBA programs and in October 2004, they received 1400 applications. Though it sounds promising to have such a number of applicants only a little over a year after its launch, U21 initially projected to have 5000 students in 2004 (OECD, 2005).

To deal with quality assurance issues, U21global created its own accreditation body, U21pedagogica, to accredit all U21 courses. U21pedagogica consists of academics from universities in the consortium who evaluate U21global's online curriculum following the same procedure used to evaluate traditional curriculum in the member universities. Eventually U21pedagogica intends to evaluate other online institutions, adding quality assurance services to its business.

Besides educational delivery, U21global offers an extensive online library to students and online career counseling.

Global University Alliance (GUA)

GUA was originally started by 10 universities, including three U.S. universities: the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, George Washington University, and the Rochester Institute of Technology; two U.K. universities: the University of Derby and the University of Glamorgan; two Australian universities: the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and the University of South Australia; Athabasca University, Canada; Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand; and the International Business School (Hoge-school Brabant), the Netherlands, in partnership with an online education company, NextEd, based in Hong Kong. NextEd is an education and training infrastructure company engaged in providing technological infrastructure to post-secondary education, primarily in Asia. Besides GUA, NextEd is involved in seven Australian and New Zealand online education/training ventures such as USQonline for the University of Southern Queensland, ACUonline for Australian Catholic University, ACAPnet for Australian College of Applied Psychology, OpenMindOnline for The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, Aimlearning for Australian Institute of Management, Atolweb for the Pan Pacific Training Company, and ACLenglish for Australian Center for Languages.

As a privately held company, GUA was launched in October 2000 in Hong Kong. It aimed to create cross-accreditation arrangements among member institutions, which allow students to enroll in a range of courses at multiple universities. It offers online graduate and professional courses in Asia, utilizing the latest interactive web-and-data-based technologies for course offerings. Its program offerings currently include health, business and management, computing and information systems, education, engineering, and the humanities. All the students have electronic access to the library at the University of Southern Australia (Johnstone & Krauth, 2002).

Like U21global, GUA's major target is students in Asia. There are study centers in Korea and Singapore, where students in the two countries can study locally without traveling to a member university. There are student counselors at those study centers who assess students' education needs and provide guidance in planning students' academic pursuits. The study centers offer courses on English language and other foundation courses to prepare students to complete undergraduate degree programs online or on-campus at one of the member institutions. There are four options for a student who pursues a degree through GUA: 1) complete the GUA foundation studies at a study center and then apply for a member institution; 2) complete all the programs at a local study center; 3) complete some courses locally at a study center and then apply for a member institution to complete all the requirements for a degree; and 4) complete some courses locally and other courses at a study center in another country.

GUA acts as a portal for a wide variety of postgraduate degrees and short courses offered by its member institutions, committing itself to building a strong brand under which all its programs from the consortium can be offered. Though a student has to apply for admission to one of the member universities and earn a degree from the home university, he or she can take courses from any participating universities. When its enrolment was started in September 2000, students in Australia,

Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and the US signed up for GUA classes. The quality assurance is made by an independent GUA Academic Council representing all GUA member universities, which also issues a Certificate of Completion for every course a student successfully completes (GUA Prospectus, 2002).

Their top page of their website was viewable by public last year listing all the options and services GUA offers to its students. However, now its top page has become a log-in page and no information is gleaned from their website without logging in as a member.

Cardean University

Cardean University is an online venture created in 1999 by the U.S. firm Unext, an American Internet education company founded in 1997, in association with University of Chicago, Columbia University Business School, Carnegie Mellon University, Stanford University and the London School of Economics and Political Science. The name, Cardean, come from Cardea, the virgin goddess of doorways in Roman mythology, as it evokes the image of opportunity (Blumenstyk, 1999). Its original idea was conceived in 1997 by Andrew Rosenfield, a senior lecturer in law at the University of Chicago Law School and a trustee of the university. The idea was developed under the umbrella of Knowledge Universe, which is a holding company in California interested in education and training companies and is owned by Michael Milken and two other close relatives of Mr. Milken.

With more than 400 full-time employees at the beginning, Unext planned to develop a series of business-related courses and initially sell those courses to multinational corporations such as General Motors, who want to train their employees worldwide via the Internet, and eventually to the public. In 2001, it started selling their courses to universities in addition to corporations and individuals. However, the economic downturn of dotcoms also hit Cardean, laying off more than 50% of its workforce in 2001.

Unlike U21global in which faculty members of its member institutions have minimal involvements in developing courses, Cardean involved faculty members in producing its courses on business-related topics and paid their institutions for the services they offered. Universities, then, would decide the way to compensate the faculty members involved. Intellectual property rights of all the course contents created for Cardean go to the institutions, not to any particular faculty member who are involved in the development of the course content. Individual faculty members who helps develop the courses do not have contracts with Unext, but make arrangements with their institutions about compensation for their involvement in the course development (Carr, 2001).

Like U21global, Cardean has the right to use member institutions' names and logos while Cardean offers degrees instead of each individual member institution. Each member institution will have limited rights to use the courses they help to produce and the technologies to deliver them, as well as royalties for the courses which would amount to a minimum of \$20 million over five to eight years. Each university will receive five percent of Unext's revenues in cash or stock options (Carr, 2000). Created during the heyday of dot-com fever, member institutions hoped to capitalize on Cardean University when it goes public.

The university has been criticized for its financial ties to Michael Milken, and the ways member universities attempt to profit using their academic resources and reputations (Blumenstyk, 1999). Faculty members of the originating institution, the University of Chicago, questioned the university's motive to join the consortium. In 2000, Cardean University gained accreditation from the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council which only accredits institutions that offer programs primarily through distance education, and offered its first courses taught by adjunct professors hired directly by Unext instead of faculty members at the member institutions (Carr, 2000).

The courses Cardean offers are much shorter in duration than those offered by traditional institutions. It now offers executive courses as well as an online MBA program. A master's degree course takes

about six weeks to complete and is based on a problem-based approach utilizing real-world business scenarios (Carr, 2000). According to BusinessWeek Online 2003 Distance Learning MBA, there were 905 students enrolled in the Carden MBA program in 2003, 85% of which were in North America. The program is offered through Web pages, chat rooms, online forms, and e-mail, with courses in accounting, e-commerce, finance, leadership and strategy.

Each student who has enrolled in Cardean University is assigned to an advisor who can provide information about the program and will answer questions regarding the university, its courses, services and the staff through telephones and emails. Cardean also provides online library services including online journals and full-text databases (Cardean University, 2005).

ASEAN Virtual Institute of Science and Technology (AVIST)

The concept of ASEAN Virtual Institute of Science and Technology (AVIST) was first proposed by the Thai Prime Minister and endorsed by the ASIAN Summit in 1999. Subsequently, funded by UNESCO and the ASEAN Foundation, the ASEAN Committee on Science and Technology (COST) conducted feasibility studies and developed its implementation plan. AVIST aims to “contribute to the development of science and technology human resources in ASEAN member countries through continuing professional education opportunities to various science and technology sectors by leveraging on the innovative use of information and communication technologies” (ASEAN, 2004).

Due to the fact that Thailand was the one who initially proposed AVIST, Thailand was asked to take up the leadership role in designing, developing, and implementing virtual teaching and learning systems at its start-up phase. Then, in May, 2004, a pilot project of AVIST was launched in Bangkok, Thailand, hosted and coordinated jointly by the Thailand Graduate Institute of Science and Technology (TGIST) and the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT). The pilot project offered 3-month courses covering the subjects of bioinformatics, ecotourism and technology and innovation management. According to the AVIST website (<http://www.avist.org/>), AVIST is still offering those three courses as of August 2005. At the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Science and Technology held in Jakarta, Indonesia, in August 12, 2005, it was decided to provide scholarships to enroll in the AVIST courses.

Technically, AVIST runs on specialized learning platform called VClass. Through VClass, students of AVIST can read documents online, download educational materials, chat with other students or their professors, and post messages to a virtual bulletin board. AVIST courses are specifically designed to be delivered online using two methods, the “virtual classroom learning” and the “virtual class on demand” (AVIST, 2005). The former offers synchronous mode of instruction, requiring students and professors to be online at the same time, while the latter offers asynchronous mode of instruction, allowing students to access their virtual class at their own convenience. Highly qualified tutors are made available to students, who provide academic consulting, and help desks who provide technical assistance.

Each member country has localized its interface. For example, in Philippine, the Advanced Science and Technology (ASTI), the research arm of the Department of Science and Technology (DoST) has customized the localized version of AVIST by adding a short message service (SMS) capability to the system due to its popularity in the country.

AVIST has nine members in South East Asia: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Institutional arrangement among institutions among those member countries was made through partnerships. For example, AVIST is in partnership with the Philippine Research, Education, and Government Information Network (PREGINET) initiative, and it is being targeted to deploy the AVIST platform to about 20 state colleges and universities in the region. AVIST itself does not have a campus, but students can utilize physical resources in participating universities.

Discussion

The above four international consortia of universities for e-learning demonstrates four different models of institutional arrangements: the first three, U21global, Global University Alliance and Cardean University, were all created in partnership with a private company: Thomson Learning, NextEd and Unext respectively, while AVIST is totally a non-profit project organized by a subcommittee of an international development organization, ASEAN. As Thomson Learning is a subsidiary of a multinational publishing house, Thomson Corporation, it is involved in every aspect of U21global's e-learning operation including contents creation, library services, and administrative supports. In other words, Thomson Learning hired its own professional staff to develop and teach the online courses, with a limited involvement from the faculty members of U21global's member institutions. NextEd is mainly an educational infrastructure provider; hence, their involvement in the content matters of GUA is minimal and GUA is acting more like a portal instead of an actual educational content provider, allowing more autonomy to member institutions. Unext, now Cardean Learning Group, is also an integrated solution provider for e-learning, which, besides Cardean University, has also created an online MBA program for Ellis College of the New York Institute of Technology. Cardean University pays member institutions to have their faculty members develop course contents.

In terms of membership arrangements, members of U21global have to give permission to use their names and logos in addition to paying a substantial membership fee. The member institutions are not involved in instructional aspects of U21global in terms of content creation, subject teaching and degree granting though they serve as the members of U21pedagogica which is an accreditation body to assure the quality of U21global's courses. Information was not available as for what member institutions gain in return of their membership to U21global. GUA is rather a portal, and its relationship with associated higher education institutions are partnership rather than membership. Partner institutions provide online courses through GUA and GUA provides a portal as well as study centers to provide students at a distance with resources and counseling services. GUA itself doesn't grant any degrees; a student has to apply for a partner institution and obtain a degree from the partner institution though he or she can take courses of any GUA partner institutions online to complete his or her degree program. As for Cardean University, each member institution is a stakeholder of the company (i.e., Cardean Learning Group) and receives five percent of its revenues in cash or stock options as well as royalties or the courses they help to produce. Cardean University offers its own degrees to its students. Lastly, AVIST consists of voluntary partnerships in which member institution will gain an opportunity to expand its student base. AVIST itself does not offer any degrees, but a 3-month training courses and issues certificates for those students who complete those courses.

In terms of quality assurance and accreditation, as mentioned above, U21global has its own independent accreditation body, U21pegagogica, all faculty appointments, subjects, and degree programs offered by U21global are subject to the prior review and approval of U21pedagogica, to ensure that these offerings reflect the same academic standard of Universitas 21 member universities. GUA also has a similar accreditation body consisting of all GUA member universities, called GUA Academic Council, which mostly assures the quality of courses offered at the GUA study centers. Unlike U21global and GUA, Cardean University has sought accreditation from a U.S. accreditation body, the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council, which gives a slightly more legitimacy to the degrees it offers. AVIST, being the newest creation, still seeks for accreditation arrangement.

To sum up the above, institutional arrangements of each consortium are shown in the following diagrams:

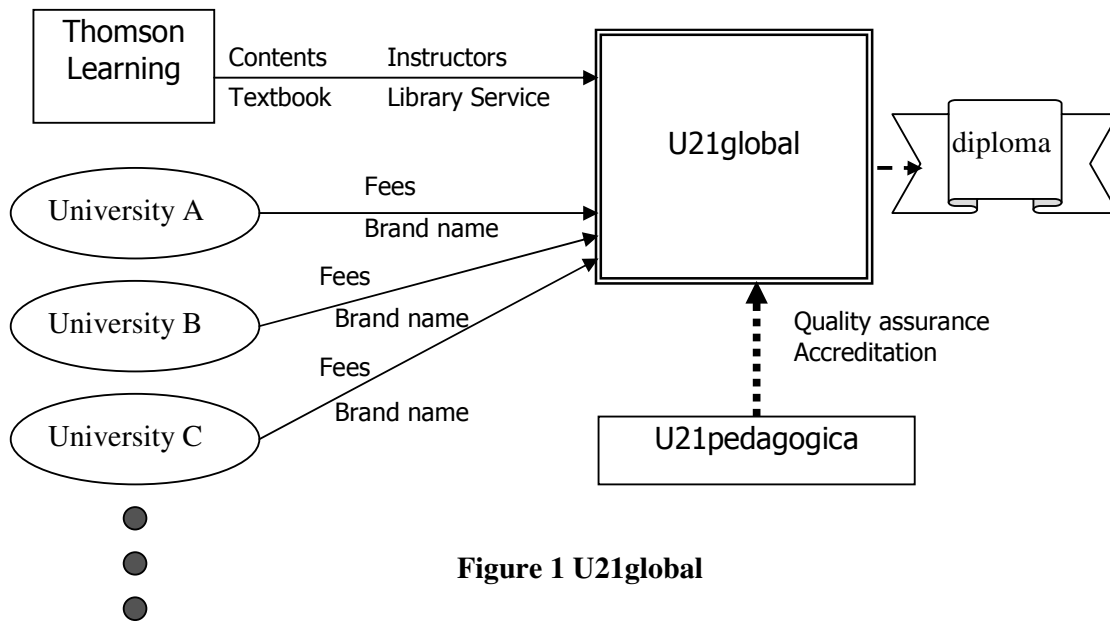


Figure 1 U21global

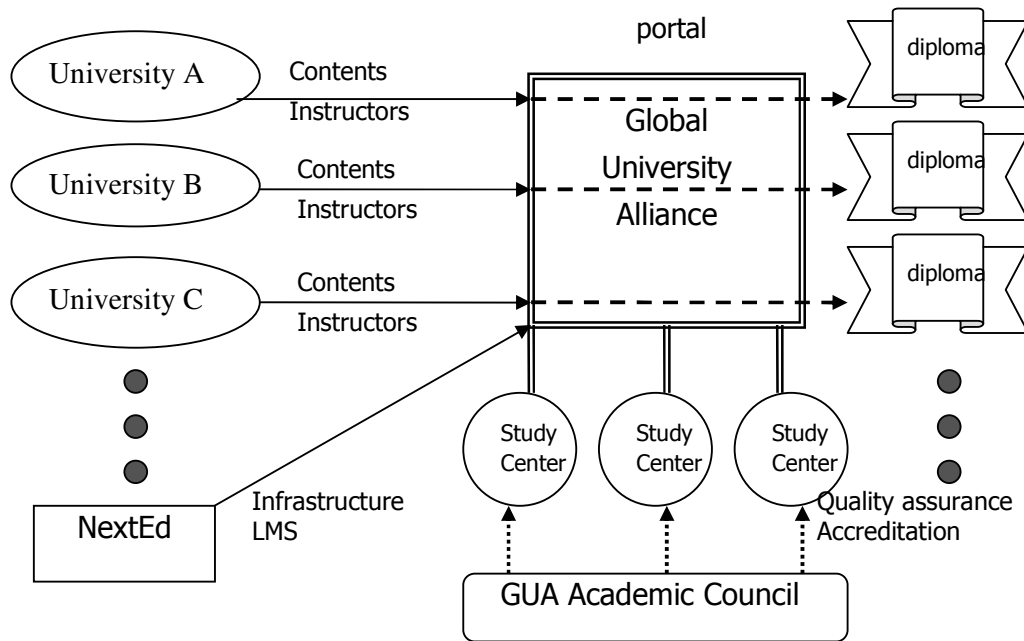


Figure 2 Global University Alliance

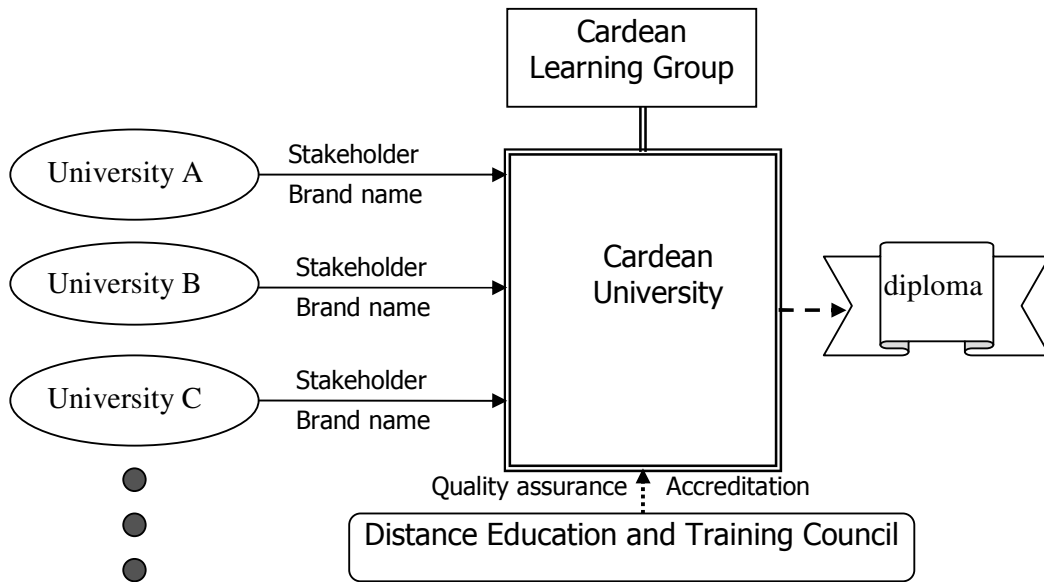


Figure 3 Cardean University

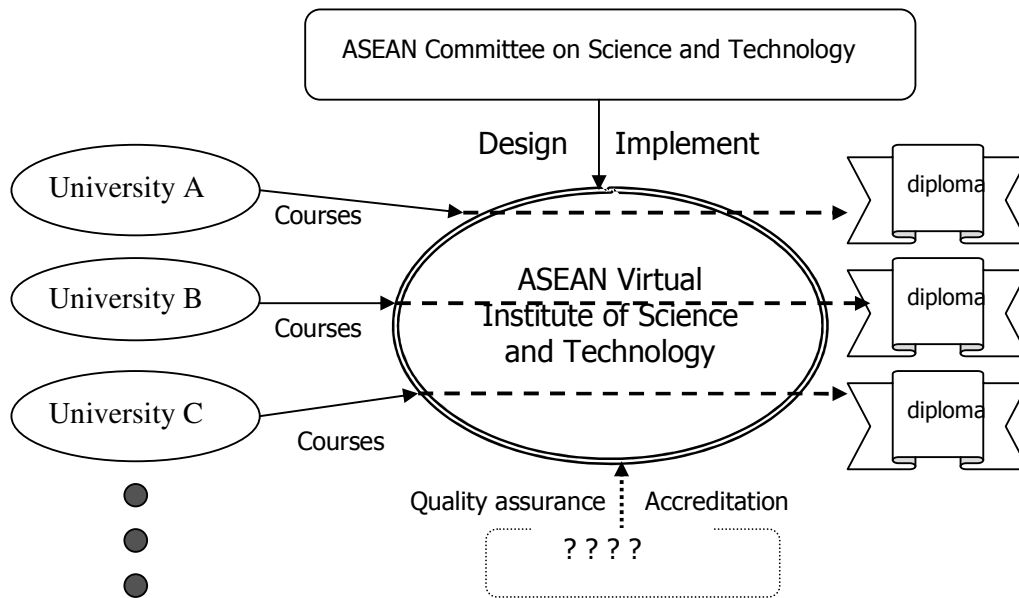


Figure 4 ASEAN Virtual Institute of Technology

It is still too early to predict which model works best. However, it is expected to see more of these kind of international consortia in the next several years as the demand for higher education increases globally and global higher educational markets are liberalized. Issues of intellectual property rights of course materials, proper accreditation and recognition of degrees offered by those consortia, quality assurance of courses being offered online, financial sustainability, and localization issues will become complex especially if the educational services are provided across borders. Those issues need be discussed in an international context as they are no longer the issues within a country. .

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