Corporate Universities
Historical Development, Conceptual Analysis & Relations with Public-sector Higher Education

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Abstract:

In recent years the number and visibility of training and development initiatives within multinational corporations that adopt the language, structure and practice of higher education has risen dramatically, yet empirical analyses of corporate universities remain rare. In this report, the authors survey some existing literature and present preliminary findings from empirical work with a number of corporate universities in Europe. There is mention of historical precedents for both commercial companies taking primary responsibility for employee training and development, and a blurred divide between higher education and vocational training. Corporate university initiatives are located within the organizational world that has generated them, and in particular recent managerial discourses of human resource management, knowledge management and the ‘learning organisation’. Interview data from directors of European corporate universities suggest these initiatives are subject to a range of intense pressures that should be taken into account in considering their significance and likely impact on existing educational providers. The report concludes with a discussion of three potential futures for corporate universities within contemporary educational provision.

About the Authors:


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1 Introduction

"...so now we had a structure, we started going out to the workshops and talking to the employees. There is untapped potential in the blue-collar workforce as it exists at the moment - people that haven't gone to university because it wasn't the thing to do, or because the families couldn’t afford it. What the men and women said to us was very interesting. They said, 'we missed a chance to go to university, we would like to do something like this, we would like to advance ourselves, we would like to be better, we would like to be part of what you do. Yes, we agree about using fancy words, we don’t want jargon but don’t look down your noses at us, we’re just as capable of understanding what a university is all about as you are'. And then one morning I had an idea - I had to make a presentation to sell the Corporate University to the directors, so I trained a few employees in giving presentations. I kicked off the presentations, but I used these three workshop employees to do the presenting. Two results: number one, it stopped people like the chairman talking about how low level employees won’t understand the corporate university, because it was them making the presentation; number two, it was the University in practice. It was actually taking people and giving them skills that they’d never dreamt that they would have - this for me was something way beyond the learning organization."

Director, Utility University

This report offers an outline of the rapidly developing corporate university phenomenon. In recent years the number and visibility of training and development initiatives within multinational corporations that adopt the language, structure and practice of higher education has risen dramatically, yet empirical analyses of corporate universities remain rare. In this report, we bring together insights from previous descriptive accounts and present preliminary findings from our own research analysis. Through this, we locate the corporate university phenomenon in a number of ways. First, we trace the historical precedents for commercial companies taking primary responsibility for employee training and development. Second, we locate corporate university initiatives within the organisational world that has generated them, and in particular contextualise them within recent managerial discourses of learning and knowledge. We use interview data from directors of European corporate universities to suggest these initiatives are subject to a range of intense pressures that should be taken into account in considering their significance and likely impact on existing educational providers. This enables us finally to discuss three potential futures for corporate universities within contemporary educational provision.

Throughout the report, we also explore how the notion of a corporate university has evolved out of a series of developments in technology, business organisation and education that are profoundly affecting how people work and learn. The increased temporal and spatial flexibility that information and communication technologies (ICTs) bring to training and education are enabling further advances in open and distance learning, providing a powerful driver for corporate university initiatives. At the same time, however, changes in managerial priorities and discourses in a globalising knowledge economy have put a premium on corporate learning processes of all sorts, and especially those that can contribute to organisational cohesion. We also note that strategic learning initiatives such as corporate universities are becoming increasingly common in the public sector, through initiatives such as the National

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1 This is a quote from an interview with a senior manager at a British organization that operated a corporate university, part of an ongoing research project at the Open University Business School (http://www3.open.ac.uk/oubs/). Names of organizations and individuals in the quotes have been changed to ensure anonymity.
Health Service University (NHS U) (see http://www.doh.gov.uk/nhsuniversity/prospectus.pdf for more details of this initiative) in the UK and the Tennessee Valley Authority University in the USA. On this basis, we suggest that corporate universities have the potential to contribute towards the re-structuring of higher education, bringing higher education and work organisations even closer together through a re-definition of the nature of knowledge, learning and employability, supported by extensive use of ICT.

We suggest that there are three roles that corporate universities may take up in the evolving institutional field of higher education. First, we explore the possibility that they could become significant competitors in the market for vocationally oriented educational programmes. Second, we examine the idea that corporate universities may become co-existing hybrid institutions, providing skills training and socialisation to a parallel yet separate market within corporations. Third, we suggest that corporate universities may become important (and very demanding) collaborators with a small and selected number of existing educational institutions, with significant implications for how industry-university relations are managed and experienced. How far each of these possibilities is realised in different countries will depend on existing institutional arrangements and the responsiveness or engagement of existing universities to corporate universities.

This report is intended to enable readers to:

- recognise the historical and cultural contexts that have contributed to this development in the interface between the education and employment systems;
- appreciate the concerns that underpin the development of corporate universities, and engage with those responsible for running them;
- make informed contributions to debates about the nature of corporate universities and their potential significance for higher education and university-industry relations;
- anticipate whether and in what ways the further development of corporate universities may impact their own higher education institutions, and the strategic issues this may raise.

References to published papers from both business and educational perspectives can be found at the end of the paper, along with a list of website addresses for a selection of corporate universities.

2 Taking Hamburger U seriously

2.1 Introduction: What’s in a name?

It seems that many who work in public or traditional universities find it difficult to take the idea of corporate university seriously (Craig et al 1999). Perhaps the amalgamation of terminology from the context of high intellectual endeavour with the name of a corporation that makes hamburgers or cartoons contains an inherent potential for humor; perhaps the laughter indicates a discomfort with the idea that McDonald’s or Disney could set up and run an institution to enable learning or knowledge production; perhaps treating corporate universities in this way masks fear of serious competition from the corporate sector. In any event, bringing corporate identity and terms such as university, academy or institute together seems to generate humour and anger in equal measure. This section presents some of the reasons why such reactions appear to us to be either condescending or shortsighted.

The term ‘corporate university’ first appeared in management and business literature in the early 1980s, referring to initiatives within corporations that are labeled university, academy, institute or school, and which often adopt the ‘symbolic paraphernalia’ of education (as one corporate university manager in our research put it). This usage is now widespread among
both practicing managers and business school researchers, and should be clearly
differentiated from similar, pejoratively employed expressions from Marxian analyses of
education. Commentators in that tradition, such as Aronowitz (2000), have referred to
‘corporate’ and ‘corporatised’ universities to mean higher education institutions that have
close research relations with industry or have adopted practices and values from the
corporate sector. It is beyond the scope of this report to explore the extensive literature
relating to university-industry relations; however, the use of the term corporatised university
is indicative of continuing concern over the role of business within the educational sector.
Doubts about the academic substance of business education (Tight 1988), reservations
about ‘massification’, and concerns about the influences on universities of their industrial
sponsors and collaborators, are significant in higher education in many countries. Hence,
when global corporations are perceived to be usurping the terminology and symbols that
denote an educational institution of the highest level, to refer to initiatives that sometimes
bear little resemblance to ‘real’ universities in activity, structure, or philosophy, incredulity
and dismay are often the result. Academics both from business schools and from wider
educational communities have protested vehemently that institutions such as McDonald’s
Hamburger U are debasing ‘the idea of the university’ (Aronowitz 2000; Craig et al 1999).

We have argued elsewhere that corporate universities are sometimes more ‘university-like’
than might be expected (Paton and Taylor 2002). Much more importantly, we would suggest
that assessing or testing corporate universities through comparison to a 19th century ideal of
‘the university’ is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the phenomenon. Corporate
universities are not aspiring to compete with or replace existing educational providers –
indeed, our research indicates that the managers involved in these initiatives do not see the
symbolism or connotations of the university label as particularly attractive, and many seek to
avoid the use of the term ‘university’ altogether. Nevertheless, language and symbolism are
important dimensions of corporate universities, as in all managerial initiatives designed to
motivate employees. For managers of corporate universities, as the three exhibits in the
second section of the report demonstrate, the presentation of training and development in
terms of a corporate university can be central to the initiative, with a view to increasing its
credibility with internal and external stakeholders. It may even be that the notion of the
‘corporate university’ is a misnomer - it would be more accurate, if less attractive, to refer to
them as ‘strategic learning initiatives within large, complex organizations’. This would then
enable us to examine the activities taking place under the corporate university umbrella with
fewer presumptions and in a more empirically informed way. However, the ‘corporate
university’ label is now well established within corporations and in research analyses, and it
is this term that we use through the report. The next section briefly traces a number of
precedents that contribute to the contemporary notion of the corporate university as we see it
practiced today.

2.2 The rise of the corporate university

Although accurate numbers are difficult to come by, there can be little doubt that corporate
university initiatives are increasingly numerous around the globe. There is a rise in visibility
through the media, with the London Financial Times sponsoring an annual corporate
university award; international conferences take place on a regular basis; corporate
promotional literature often features a short section on the local corporate university initiative.
Consultancy companies such as PriceWaterhouse Coopers, reliable indicators of current
business trends, are also beginning to offer services to organizations that wish to set up or
more effectively run corporate universities. Currently, the ‘headline figure’ supplied by the
premier consultancy company in this area suggests that there are around 2000 such
initiatives in the US alone, rising from 15 in the early 1980s and 400 in the mid-1990s (see
http://www.corpu.com). Many of Europe’s most prestigious corporations are either
exploring the nature of corporate universities through peer groups facilitated by practitioner
and professional organizations, or actively setting them up and running them. Corporate
University Xchange, the leading consultancy company in this field, has even claimed that by 2010 there may be more corporate universities than public universities.

On their own, such figures invite, and warrant, some scepticism – future trend projection is an inexact science, and management and business initiatives are notorious for generating promotional hyperbole. More importantly, however, obvious questions relate to the difference made by corporate universities. How many initiatives, for example, constitute nothing more than a ‘re-badging’ of existing training and development – ‘changing the sign above the door and little else’, as one manager in our study put it. Fashion is an important dynamic in the spread of ideas and practices among large corporations, and there are clearly some ‘faddish’ elements in the current high levels of interest. Some corporate universities have failed to find a secure niche in the ecology of corporate life, and been quietly closed down (as Exhibit three in the second section demonstrates).Nevertheless, there are several reasons for believing that corporate universities will become semi-permanent and embedded features in the corporate landscape, and as such public universities may need to engage with them, rather than simply seek distance through humour or disdain.

There are several bases for this contention. First, corporate universities have a significant pre-history. As Eurich pointed out in 1985, corporate dissatisfaction with educational ‘products’ (i.e., potential employees) and processes has existed since the earliest days of industrial production. ‘Corporate classrooms’ were set up by DuPont, General Electric and Edison in the 19th century to provide more suitably skilled employees than the US education system could at that time. We would also note here that the vision of the university as separate from business (and indeed as separate from any other societal institution) that led to the image of academics working in an ‘ivory tower’ is relatively recent. The roots and early development of universities in Europe located them in a messy and complex web of relationships within society, often with little regard to the notions of academic independence or freedom that are so central to our understanding of university work today. Corporate universities, then, are not generating interplay between education and business that has no precedents, and should not be demonized for ‘poisoning’ an ideal vision of the university.

Second, the extent of corporate education and training activity is economically enormous. Although reliable estimates of both the number of people and the amount of money in corporate training and development programmes are again lacking, estimates of spending levels sometimes reach as high as 10% of total corporate turnover. More importantly, as Eurich also noted, it is safe to speculate that the amount invested and the number of participants involved in corporate education and training is at least equal to levels in the ‘traditional’ higher education sector. In 2000, the ‘Employment Policy Foundation’ in Washington DC (see http://www.epf.org) estimated that direct and indirect training and development costs totalled between 284 and 387 billion US dollars each year in the private sector alone, and they further claimed that the private sector is also the largest training provider in the US. While the proportions and total figures will vary from country to country, this gives an indication of the importance of the corporate education and training sector.

Third, and perhaps more important, is the cultural significance of large corporations. At the ‘Academy of Management’ meeting in Washington DC in 2001, Jeanne Meister of the Corporate University Xchange consultancy company, the closest that the corporate university phenomenon has to a guru figure, posed the following question to an audience of academics during a symposium on corporate universities - if your child were given the choice of attending a mediocre public university to study management, or a corporate university with the guarantee of a job at the end of a broadly similar degree course, which would you recommend to the child? The reaction was, predictably, on the side of the non-corporate institution, and there was some incredulity that the question could even be posed. However, the value of credentials from some public universities (when higher education participation rates approach 50% in the UK) may be less than the students (and academics) would wish.
When the largest, most prestigious corporations routinely recruit from a very limited number of prestige universities that are increasingly difficult to access, and when a large consultancy company such as KPMG begins to recruit directly from schools through a ‘cadetship’ programme, Meister’s scenario may not be far-fetched. It may constitute a serious dilemma for some universities. Of course, a degree from a prestige university will retain social value and cultural capital that cannot be replicated, but qualifications gained through a corporate university, and obtained while gaining considerable and prestigious industrial experience, may well acquire a currency that ‘outperforms’ credentials from less prestigious universities. Combining this with the increasingly active role that corporations can take on within societies around the globe, and it seems dangerous for public universities just to ignore or decry corporate universities.

This then is the background and context of the corporate university phenomenon. Historically, there are precedents for this kind of activity; corporate training and development is a huge market both economically and in terms of student numbers; and education as an institution in society is continually changing and reforming. In the next section, working from these bases, we seek to approach the corporate university phenomenon from the inside. We argue that in order to understand this development it is necessary to locate it within the discourses and dynamics of the corporate sector. We present the perspectives of three senior corporate university managers from our own ongoing research, and address some of the issues that they raise.

3 Understanding the corporate context

"The idea for having a corporate university you’d have to credit with the Chief Executive of the group. He started at the bottom in his first banking post many years ago, without any university qualifications or anything like that, and eventually worked his way up through the system – he got the books that MBAs were reading, but didn’t do the MBA himself. He felt quite strongly that educating people was important, and that if the company aspired to attract and retain the people that we wanted, we had to do something else other than pay them more. I don’t think you’d describe him as a liberal, you would just say that, actually, this makes good business sense. It was a set of ideals that we could see was a good idea - having corporate learning as part of the structure was good business sense." - Director, Financial Services University

3.1 Introduction

The essential question that we address in this section is why corporations want their own universities. There are many answers and, as we shall see, corporate universities can take very different forms. We suggest that the phenomenon is best understood by outlining three current managerial discourses, each of which readily accommodates the corporate university idea, and which together provide fertile ground for corporate university projects when a sponsor or champion of the idea emerges. These discourses centre on Human Resource Management (HRM), Knowledge Management (KM), and the Learning Organisation (LO). This means that corporate universities can be initiated and justified from several quite different perspectives - they need not be tied to the sponsorship of any single function or group, as most managerial initiatives are.

The rapidly changing vocabulary of business is often and understandably a target for criticism and merriment. It is important to remember that these discourses have gained wide currency because they help to express and address, at least aspirationally, important tangles of issues confronting businesses. In this context, the rapid development and deployment of new ICTs, the pace of industrial change and restructuring in Western economies, and the progressive integration of businesses across international frontiers have all been major drivers of change in corporate structures and processes, and provide the general context in
which these discourses have become widespread and influential. This is not to suggest that they should be accepted uncritically, as unproblematic reflections of reality. However, they do provide a useful way of appreciating the business context of corporate universities, one aspect of which is unrelenting change. The section ends by highlighting the implications this has for the structure and functioning of corporate universities themselves.

3.2 Human Resource Management (HRM)

Although the term was used for many years, HRM came to have a clearly differentiated meaning in the early 1980s, as academics at the Universities of Michigan and Harvard put together new MBA modules under the title. The courses were in response to requests from senior managers and aspiring executives at those business schools for a course component that would enable them to understand ‘people issues’ (such as recruitment, appraisal, or training and development) at a strategic level – that is, to assess how these activities contributed to corporate goals and refine the ways in which they could be oriented towards competitive advantage. Thus, the building of a strong and distinctive corporate culture through ‘people management’ procedures became a concern within many large companies. This was in stark contrast to traditional personnel management courses, primarily concerned with the legal and administrative aspects of those same ‘people issues’.

Differentiating HRM from personnel management and existing industrial relations practice was crucial to constructing it as a new discipline within the management and business area, and to convincing practicing managers that it could lead to competitive advantage. The notion of managing human resources to fulfil business strategy and aims dominated this endeavour, and is reflected in initiatives like the Investors in People (IiP) award in the UK (see http://www.iipuk.co.uk). Companies that choose to be assessed for this award have to show that training and training assessment is consistently oriented towards the achievement of business goals. Similarly, recruitment and selection processes are often framed by the notion of competencies, as prospective employees are compared to a list of behavioural and attitudinal ideals that have been identified as business critical – helping to align a people management process and business aims.

The introduction of philosophies of HRM was supported by changing cultural understandings and structural conditions for many employees and managers. In the UK, legislation relating to work and the workplace diminished the role of collective representation and emphasised individualised contracts, as well as giving employers significantly more freedom to offer short-term contracts. The notion of ‘employability’ came to the fore, and the ‘organisation man’ [sic] transformed into the ‘portfolio worker’ or the ‘knowledge worker’. In the US, this shift has been even more pronounced, as senior managers in large corporations redefined people as either ‘core’ (permanent and crucial) or ‘periphery’ (temporary and easily replaceable).

Popular representation of corporate university initiatives in the business press (see, for example, accounts of the annual Financial Times–Corporate University Xchange awards, at http://www.ft.com) and practitioner accounts emphasise the strategic HRM intent of corporate university practice and philosophy. In addition, corporate universities are sometimes credited with being a more active aspect of the re-definition of corporate responsibility towards employees. Companies may no longer be able to offer the security of a job for life or even a career, but corporate universities, it is often suggested, provide opportunities for individuals to ensure their own employability within and beyond the company. No longer will career development managers call people in once a year to remind them of the need to update or upgrade skills through training and development programmes - staff must be the masters of their own careers and they have access to the corporate university’s programmes to achieve this. Our first exhibit, drawing on interviews within a
British financial services company, shows how one organisation attempted to reconcile this 'hard' approach to people management with an existing structure of social responsibility.

Exhibit 1: Combining social values and commercial advantage

Setting up a corporate university is a public statement of the importance a company places on staff development and on professional standards. It is simultaneously a way of ensuring the company possesses the requisite know-how and of building a reputation for socially responsible employment. Thus, a corporate university is seen as one way of building employee commitment and making the company attractive to potential employees. It may also be used to develop relationships with customers. For example, in negotiating with an African government one oil company, highlighted (apparently to good effect) the way its corporate university would train local staff and ensure identical professional standards in its operations. The case presented here highlights the tensions between the twin strands of social values and commercial advantage that many corporate university are expected to integrate, in order to gain staff and customer commitment, and at the same time meet shareholder expectations – restructuring the HRM aspect of the company along the way.

At an individual level, all of the senior personnel involved in the corporate university have strong social values, but I wouldn’t want to overstate the case. We can see quite pragmatically that in a world where you have a commodity that looks similar to other commodities, you need to do something else to be able to create the differentiation - some of these differentiators could come from other areas. All that’s fine as a kind of conceptual stuff, but of course you’ve got to pay for it - we are here to create value for the shareholders. Part of the very straightforward issue around creating value is that you’ve got to be able to get your cost base to a level where you can compete and create value and drive the share price up. One of the legacy costs that we’re carrying is the costs in HR. In the past, the company has employed one member of HR staff for every 30 other staff, and a large part of the HR over-manning was in the training area. We had about one third of the HR staff employed in training in one way or other, designing, delivering or administering and running their own training functions. We had 26 training functions in the UK - 26 different training organisations or companies within the group.

First of all, we created a brand and marketing around the corporate university - it’s strong on principles, it’s strong on values. When we set up the corporate university, we said that we’re in the business of encouraging personal responsibility, we will behave in a way that is adult, we will challenge individuals around their learning, and we will be equally challenging of ourselves in the support. Structurally, as part of the establishment of the corporate university we created a number of faculties: on leadership, on customers, on technology, and on banking. They are our four faculties - we have deans of faculty, and in each case those people are members of the Group Executive Committee so they are significant players in their own right.
We need to have an infrastructure across the country, which means that the business case for learning development was to reduce the costs of training, and to facilitate a shift from classroom training to other forms of training. The corporate university laptops are part of the tangible manifestation of this... probably the greatest chunk of the investment has gone here. That and regional learning centres save hotel costs, so that’s of benefit because we’re spending less of the training budget on accommodation - the figure for this in our 2002 budget is many millions of pounds, so the corporate university is partly aimed at reducing that. The infrastructure obviously facilitates e-delivery, but that’s quite a leap for people. The pressure for short-term results from the City [of London], particularly to reduce the cost base, creates huge pressures in the business for costs to be squeezed out, and yet things like the corporate university are longer term. To gain medium term benefits in a climate where you’re trying to push the business cost as low as you can means that you’ve got to have quite a lot of resilience and quite a lot of patience, to believe that what you’re doing is going to be the right thing in the long-term. - Director, Financial Services University

3.3 Knowledge Management

The second managerial discourse on which corporate university managers draw heavily is that of Knowledge Management (KM). This has its origins in the claim that intellectual capital and other intangibles are critical assets of modern corporations (Scarbrough et al 1999). KM has been especially well received in fast-moving science and technology based industries, where it is argued that success is achieved by companies that can draw on and integrate many different and often highly specialised or context-specific strands of expertise and experience to improve processes, tackle a new challenge, or avoid ‘re-inventing wheels’. Characteristically, however, such know-how or organisational knowledge is widely distributed, embedded in ways of working, and in important dimensions its significance may not even be recognised. KM, therefore, is a response to the perception that companies often have great difficulty in bringing to bear the knowledge they encompass, and that they need to do more to recognise it and make it an accessible resource. Hence the emergence of specialist KM consultancies, jobs with KM in their title, and postgraduate modules in business schools on KM concepts, approaches and issues.

As with HRM, there is doubt as to how much of what goes on in the name of KM is new, rather than a re-badging of familiar practices (such as information systems, libraries, professional networking, etc). Research indicates that much KM activity involves attempts to ‘capture’ and codify practice, or in other words to articulate explicitly knowledge that is more or less tacit, embedded and informal – a task that the first modern management movement, Scientific Management, sought to achieve in the early 20th century. Activities often involve the construction of databases where, for example, project documents are lodged, enabling employees to find out whether anyone else has faced similar problems. Less common but more sophisticated approaches recognise the social relations that are so important for processes of knowledge sharing and transfer, and try to foster ‘communities of practice’ across large companies.

It is our belief that the knowledge production - research-oriented - activities of large companies may also be relevant in this context. In an influential analysis Michael Gibbons and colleagues (Gibbons et al, 1994) have argued that knowledge production has moved beyond the confines of the university and is now widespread in industry. There is a new form of knowledge creation has developed, ‘Mode 2’. Traditional (‘Mode 1’) knowledge production, prominent in universities, is characterised by being largely discipline-based,
separated from application, context-free and conducted and controlled through highly institutionalised processes. Mode 2 knowledge production has very different attributes:

- knowledge is produced in the context of application and is more contingent;
- research and the knowledge produced is transdisciplinary;
- research comes to conclusions more rapidly, is less institutionalised (i.e. it can take place on a range of sites), and is funded through diverse sources;
- quality control is achieved through diverse means, such as whether a solution to the driving problem is found, or whether the research and knowledge produced are cost effective.

As ‘conventional’ universities are based on the production, preservation and dissemination of knowledge, corporate universities would seem the natural location for the management or production of knowledge within work organisations. And indeed those involved often claim that knowledge management is a basic activity within their corporate universities. However, fewer refer to the production of new knowledge in the way that Gibbons and his colleagues write so persuasively about. Our research to date indicates that, with one possible exception in the business consultancy sector, formal research and development remains separate from corporate university operations, both physically (if the corporate university exists in a physical sense) and politically within the organisation. It remains to be seen whether this will continue to be the case, or whether in some industries at least, the corporate university will incorporate or be associated with certain R&D functions.

A secondary driver for investing in a corporate university is the rationalisation of relations with external suppliers and partners from the educational world – as one corporate university manager put it, training and development is the ‘last great slush fund’ through which just about anything could be funded. Senior directors perceive a need to manage the knowledge that comes into organisations through more formal relations with existing educational suppliers. The corporate university in one organisation studied was intended as a means of managing more than 100 individual contracts with educational suppliers and partners, many reliant on personal relations between individuals on both sides. We would suggest that this is potentially more significant for public universities than the production or management of knowledge – many large corporations have long established means of producing and managing knowledge, working in partnership with public universities. What may be changing is the nature of the client-supplier relationship that public universities have worked with since multinationals became significant customers. This dynamic is prominent in our second exhibit, an account from the director of a corporate university in the engineering sector in the UK.

**Exhibit 2: The corporate university on the edge of the company:**

**Managing relevant learning**

As strategic initiatives, corporate universities involve a degree of centralisation – their purpose is to ensure training and development are aligned with corporate goals and undertaken in ways that promote a common understanding between different business units. And yet standardisation and central control can easily be a recipe for local irrelevance. This case illustrates some of the challenges and tensions within a corporate university with a remit to examine and change practice within a corporation. The solution found by corporate university managers in this company rests on maintaining a distance from the corporate centre, while being careful not to become too marginal, and on being selective in their interventions.
The corporate university goes back to 1994 when the company was about to embark on a major corporate change program, and what really prompted that was poor perceptions in the market place and the City about our value and performance. We had a share crisis around that time and we were looking at the organization, recognizing its obvious strengths and recognizing its fragmentation. Best practice was unshared and remained where it resided. We had as many cultures and structures as we had business units, and there was a challenge to bring the organization together as a high performing company.

One of the principle actions in this change program was the establishment of a corporate university, charged with looking after the technology needs and the knowledge needs of the organization. It was launched in 1997 and comprised initially of a Benchmarking and Best Practice Faculty, an Engineering Faculty, a Learning and Development Faculty and a Business School to provide strategic level analysis. It’s very much helping the organization, and as you can imagine the corporate university was devoted to the learning and development needs of the company, so we had a very tight relationship with where the company wanted to go from a strategy point of view. We were dealing with the strategy, the top level end of creating learning and developing opportunities for the business and the knowledge sharing, and other opportunities for the profits of the business. We were, and continue to be, a very small team, currently 19 people, facing off to 120,000 globally.

So, we work extensively through networks and preferred partners in the academic world. We do not manage or provide administration for people attending courses - we establish a framework of preferred partners, preferred courses, in keeping with our emphasis on engineering systems and managerial conferences, and the corporate university sets up the framework and partnerships, leaving the transactional side of learning provision to others. Our role is co-ordination more than anything.

We’ve invested heavily in applying knowledge management - how do you share best practice, a process that says, “I have a challenge in the business. How do I compare with world class or best of class companies? How do they achieve that performance? How might I adapt my practices to their practices in a way that’s sensible to my business? And then how do I review the outcome? How do I share those lessons back into the organisation?” And we, I think, learnt the painful way about that process and what works and what doesn’t work, because for many people sharing and learning should be the most natural thing in the world to do. We all do it as we grow from babies into adults, we learn continuously - those that nurture us teach us, but in organisations for some reason it doesn’t work.

I think the corporate university has to be careful because we have finite resource – our first responsibility is to deliver value internal to the organisation. The second priority then is to our joint ventures, our customers and our suppliers. We find that we often talk to our joint venture partners about what we do, they find it very interesting, they like what we do, but for some reason they find it difficult politically to engage with us, because those that lead those businesses like to have their autonomy. To tie it too closely to us, in terms of infrastructure, strategy and methodology, would be uncomfortable.

The philosophy that we have is based on the idea that, although you need a building to physically locate people, we have always been a virtual concept, so if there are physical buildings that people need to go to have training, than it will be done remotely through third parties. The rationale - and it’s probably obvious – is that we’re not going to be good at everything. There are people that are well established, in traditional universities, or for example as Outward Bound trainers, in niches out there that are very specialised, who are very expert at what they do. The primary importance for us is to create a learning and development strategy that’s right for the company and then we can deploy that strategy with our partners who do what they do. – Director, Engineering University
3.4 Learning organisations

Finally, and perhaps most relevant to corporate university discourse, is the increased emphasis within management and business circles around the notion of learning. As long ago as the 1950s, the founders of action learning claimed that for any organisation in a competitive environment to survive, the rate of learning within the corporation must exceed the rate of change in the environment. Learning took on a heightened, almost talismanic importance within the corporate context however with the publication of various theories of organisational learning and the Learning Organisation (LO) in the early 1990s (see especially Senge 1993 and Marquardt and Reynolds 1994). Definitions of and recommendations to accomplish an LO are many and varied, but there are several recurring themes. First is the notion that LOs exist in a permanent state of transformation and change, in contrast to the fixed bureaucratic organisation of early 20th century accounts of organisation. Second comes the need for systems thinking, to see the interconnectedness of a 'bigger picture' and to avoid learning the wrong, parochial lessons. Finally, LOs encourage learning by individuals and teams throughout an organisation.

This discourse, too, is open to criticism, particularly when we consider the power relations within large corporations and the idealistic nature of an LO as set out by its proponents (see Exhibit 2). The understanding of learning, and in particular the potential that a corporate university provides for employees to critically reflect within a transnational corporation (whether on the nature of current practices and procedures in the company or on a more personal level), appears to us to be circumscribed by the social and cultural location of the initiative. Nevertheless, the notion of the LO is pervasive and forms a backdrop for much managerial activity in training and development. Corporate university publicity has, unsurprisingly, adopted the discourse enthusiastically. The accounts in Exhibits 1 and 2 drew on a learning perspective in passing, and Exhibit 3, below, makes more explicit use of it.

3.5 The precariousness of corporate universities

As noted above, being located within a profit-making organisation brings very particular pressures and tensions to learning, the management of learning, and the management of learning initiatives. Given also the pace of change in corporate structures and processes, it is unsurprising that the contribution and approach of corporate universities may be reviewed and adjusted every few years - and that some fail to secure a viable niche in the ecology of corporate life, as Exhibit 3 illustrates. The account indicates some of the tensions and issues that we believe are unique to corporate universities as educational initiatives. In order to piece together the life of ‘Utility University’, one of the best known British corporate universities, we have had to find and interview a number of managers who have left the company, retiring or moving on to new posts elsewhere. In addition, the university no longer exists in any sense within the organisation except 'in fragments, in people's heads', as one manager put it.

Hence those dealing with a corporate university from outside the corporation need to remember that such initiatives are an attempt on the part of senior managers to cope with rapid change, inside companies and in trading environments, and these initiatives are subject to those same changes and rates of change. Corporate university development can resemble time-lapse photography – it appears as if a flower is opening with incredible rapidity when a structure is set up within three years to manage training and development for more than 100,000 people. However, as the exhibit indicates, corporate universities can also wither and ultimately disappear equally rapidly. By comparison with public universities they are likely to resemble provisional arrangements lacking institutional qualities. This may not however be an accurate reflection of corporate university activity, as we shall argue in the final section of this report.
Exhibit 3: Virtual existence and real sponsors

Not long after privatisation we understood that we needed to be different – we’d become a well-organised company with a commercial view, but we knew that we were going to be under pressure. There was a view that we ought to be changing the very soul of the company, and we came up with the idea that we ought to have a university, a Corporate University. What could be better than a university, which was all about knowledge and learning and experience. The CEO went off to Harvard University and he came back fired up with the idea that we had to change the company, fired up with the idea of a Corporate University. I was saying [to him] ‘I’ve got a vision and I want you to sign up to the vision - just do it with your heart and we’ll sort out the details afterwards’, but now I think the trick is to just get enough detail sorted out up front to reassure the ‘mechanics’. We knew it was a grand vision, but we were struggling with what the idea meant - we recognised that there was something important to do in terms of knowledge management, but there were people who were thought that it was all airy-fairy stuff that the employees wouldn’t understand. In the end, we went ahead and organised the corporate university into four core capabilities, and had a very senior person in the organisation heading up each of the core faculties of the university. We had [Jim Smith] as the first faculty head - we gave him the mortarboard and gown and we had a celebration in the company!

We began to think of doing a variety of things, beginning to get more people involved - we went into this period and I really steamed ahead with all of it. I began to see things and introduced a whole variety of new ideas. There were issues around whether we could allow other people to share, would we allow other companies to share in it - we never got to the bottom of, and I still haven’t made up my mind about it, as the corporate university was very much giving our company an advantage. It was also about being focused on our people, customers and employees, but at the end of the day it was about making a better company and it’s a competitive world. We shared our ideas with everyone about what we were doing, but we didn’t get to the point of allowing somebody from a competitor to join in with our master-classes. You’d have to think carefully about it - does BP allow Shell people to come into their classes? Why should you give away your intellectual advantage to other people?

Towards the end, there was no-one left to argue passionately in the organisation for all of this. We went from being a very high profile organisation globally because of the corporate university and it’s just withered - they’ve regressed from the learning organisation back to conventional training programmes. People forgot that if you invest in all these wonderful ideas it enables the organisation to cut costs, cut people, improve and expand services and change. But you make all this investment in R&D and innovation and knowledge creation, then the investment is withdrawn because people can’t see… the argument is always ‘show me what benefit it’s going to be next year’, and you can’t. You can’t connect the success of downsizing with a corporate university - there isn’t an ‘a leads to b’.
Did we have any problems? Yes, of course. First of all, we said initially that we wanted everyone to be a student of the corporate university, and that everyone had to do something, but the first problem we had was the director of finance, who refused to participate. Second, if we could have produced the structure of the corporate university much earlier, senior people would have been engaged earlier, so that when I left it would have been harder for it to fail. We took so long - it took five years to get all the structures, mechanisms and models worked out, the way in which the open learning centres would link in and the best practice teams migrating knowledge throughout the organization, all of this stuff, the development of the intranet. But a corporate university depends so much on the personalities of individuals. - Director, Utility University

4 Corporate Universities- The variety of strategic intent and practice

Finally, there is a dilemma in that we need to stand slightly outside the company to take a view of it and understand what it needs - but we can't become too distant or detached, because our ability then to deliver operational related value will diminish. Our ability then to differentiate ourselves from any other third party, or learning and development supplier, will diminish, so there is a fine balance to be struck. Although we stand slightly outside of the business, it's imperative to move with the business.

Director, Engineering University

4.1 Introduction

It is becoming clear, through description and analysis of corporate university initiatives, that a corporate university can take a wide variety of forms, some more relevant to higher education than others. This section tries to map that variety and to identify the main trends in the practice of corporate university management. We suggest that it is useful to think of corporate universities as varying on two key dimensions. The first concerns the nature of the learning: this axis ranges from a narrow training focus (imparting information, developing specific vocational skills), through broader forms of education and professional development (including a socialisation into organisational values and practices), and finally on to those that encompass forms of research as well as advanced teaching and learning.

The second dimension concerns the spatial organisation of the corporate university - whether it is focussed on a specific facility or network of learning centres (the campus model), or whether it is primarily 'virtual', delivering training and learning through electronic media. We are able to combine these two dimensions (see Figure 1 below), and to highlight four different types of corporate university. In reading this diagram, it should be borne in mind that such 'types' are of course simplifications - real organisations are messier and more dynamic than this.

The most familiar type represented here is the classic company training school or college. Many of these have been upgraded recently in various ways to raise the status and profile of training both inside and outside the organisation - McDonalds Hamburger U can be seen as an exemplar of this type of corporate university. They focus on delivering the skills needed for consistency, quality and efficiency in core operations. Such initiatives are often represented as compensating for the shortcomings of secondary educational systems, as at one of the original corporate universities, Motorola U.

The second type of corporate university – best described as 'Computer-Based Training (CBT) on the Intranet' - is much more recent, but has been the focus for very considerable investment in particular industries and contexts, and provides the basis for much popular
press coverage of corporate university initiatives. The reason for investment in this type of corporate university is obvious: whenever large numbers of staff have to be regularly re-trained (to use new software tools, for example, or to comply with new legislation), or updated (for example, on the features and terms of the latest products they sell), the costs of providing such training on a face-to-face basis have been considerable. Hence, by switching to electronically delivered training companies may save enormously on staff travel and accommodation costs, particularly when they are internationally distributed. Managers have also found it easier to provide the training consistently, in a timely manner, and with less disruption to work schedules (sometimes because training takes place outside work time). Debate may continue over the scope for this method of delivery in the longer term - whether and how far it can be used for ‘softer’ topics less amenable to right and wrong answers; how far it can develop beyond its pedagogic origins in programmed learning. Nevertheless, that there are important contexts in which it can be highly cost-effective is no longer in question.

The Shell Open University is an example both of reducing training spend and of a highly distributed organisation that needs to pass on information quickly, as a manager involved in our research has outlined; a second is Unipart, where (it is said) you can learn in the morning and apply it in the afternoon – not least because there is a dedicated PC on every shopfloor that links to the Unipart U (see http://www.ugc.co.uk/learning/lea_0100.htm for details).

**Figure 1: A tentative typology of corporate universities along two axes**

The third type of corporate university - designated the ‘chateau’ or ‘country house’ experience - was also a familiar feature of the corporate landscape before corporate universities became common. Management, leadership and executive development has traditionally taken place in well-appointed rural locations away from the headquarters, but in recent years such initiatives have had a renaissance. They are now seen as one way of addressing a major corporate challenge – how to promote cohesion across highly differentiated international businesses, especially those that have often grown through acquisition and merger. The importance, and the difficulty, of building a common understanding and effective management teams out of diverse national and corporate cultures cannot be over-stated. The reinvention of the management college as the incubator of a shared corporate culture, through intense face-to-face development activities and the creation of cross-organisational networks, may then be a result of the increased frequency of
multinational mergers. Being semi-detached from the pace and pressure of mainstream corporate life, such facilities may also provide a social space where the normal codes are, to a degree, relaxed, and assumptions can be questioned. To this extent they may also have a role as corporate ‘think tanks’, where senior figures or rising stars can take time out to analyse, debate and think through emerging challenges, in relation both to internal issues faced by the organisation, and wider concerns over, for example, the natural environment or the location of production. Examples of this sort of corporate university are the Rüschlikon facility in Switzerland owned by Swiss Re (see http://www.ruschlikon.com) and Boeing’s Leadership Development Center in the US (see http://www.boeing.com/companyoffices/aboutus/leadershipcenter/).

Finally, there is what we call the polymorphous corporate university. This may embrace a wide range of learning (that is, technical and professional as well as business management), supported in diverse ways (combining e-learning with face-to-face elements, mentoring, action learning, placements, and so on). However, it is also polymorphous in the sense that the form and focus are likely to change quite frequently, in response to shifting perceptions of strategic priorities (re-structuring being a normal rather than an exceptional occurrence in corporate life). The corporate university of Cap Gemini Ernst & Young has several of these features, having played different roles at different points in the twelve years of its existence. While the chateau campus near Paris remains the heart of the corporate university, the corporate university staff is distributed around the world. Increasing use is made of e- and blended learning, and professional updating in a very fast-moving industry is provided through an on-line magazine. Great emphasis is also given to fostering communities and networks among the different sorts of professionals that work in the company.

4.2 Trends in corporate university development

We end this section by offering some observations on the future of corporate universities - even if, for all the reasons already discussed, confident claims would be foolhardy. We would not be surprised if in a few years the upsurge in use of academic labels, such as university, subsides, perhaps being superseded by a different organising aspiration. We would be surprised, however, if corporations ceased to be concerned with the underlying issues of corporate university activity, and no longer promoted strategic learning initiatives of different sorts to address them. Cultivating and combining diverse, specialised expertise looks set to remain a fundamental challenge for business. To be economically productive, such expertise cannot be detached and abstracted; it must be or quickly become highly contextualised, both as regards specific features of the situations in which it is applied, and in terms of the social codes and priorities of the organisational setting. Hence, the drive by large corporations to exercise a far higher degree of influence over learning processes is about seeking the greatest value for money in relation to their particular operating circumstances and strategies. How consistently, with what priority, and in what ways particular companies address this concern will doubtless continue to vary, but it is a concern that is unlikely to fade to any great extent - if only because the sums involved are so considerable.

Moreover, these challenges also arise in the public sector. In the UK, initiatives such as the National Health Service University, alongside the revision of longer established colleges for police forces and the military, indicate that corporate universities already exist beyond the corporate sector, and are expanding. Indeed, a corporate university approach may offer particular attractions to governments that are impatient with the slow pace of change in reforming professional education, or are keen to develop new styles of management and leadership in the highly institutionalised settings of public service.

Further, if there is an underlying trend in the shape of such initiatives, it may be from the ‘classical’ to the ‘polymorphous’. This suggestion rests largely on expectations about the
development of ICT applications for learning. Corporate universities that focus largely on ‘CBT on the Intranet’ or ‘the chateau experience’ may well be transitional forms as ICT applications evolve to provide richer media for the support of virtual communities and pedagogically more sophisticated forms of e-learning. Further, these may then be blended with other modes of professional development (under the banner of ‘technology-enhanced learning’).

This brief treatment of the potential futures for corporate university development leads us to the final section of this report, where we deal in more depth with three aspects of corporate university-public education interaction – coexistence, competition and collaboration.

5 Competition, co-existence and collaboration

Notwithstanding the many differences between corporate universities and public universities that we have set out in this report, there still appears to be significant resistance from within academic communities to the idea of a corporate university, and fear as to whether these new initiatives will threaten established educational institutions. This section considers the impact of corporate universities on the wider institutional field of higher education in terms of three ways in which they may relate to public universities - as self-contained, co-existent entities, as competitors, and as collaborators.

5.1 Coexistence

Public universities are uniquely differentiated in many ways: often operating in protected markets with limited competition, providing a service or product that cannot be replicated either in terms of content or outcome, valued societally for the provision of critical thought and independence to individuals both in terms of teaching and learning. Socially, they provide formative experiences and rites of passage in the transition to adulthood for many young people, and furnish them with social networks that are often important thereafter. Clearly, these contributions are not about to be swept away by corporate universities. Pre-vocational and liberal arts higher education, in particular, may feel little impact from the development of the corporate university phenomena, especially in countries where degree awarding powers are tightly controlled.

5.2 Competition

Where universities are engaged in various forms of professional development and already count corporate-sponsored students among their customers, there is clearly scope for competition. Some corporate universities (such as ABN-Amro in the Netherlands and the Tennessee Valley Authority in the USA) are extending their offerings to stakeholders such as customers and suppliers, and in the US some have been ‘spun off’ as subsidiary companies. For example, the Arthur D. Little School of Management in the USA began life in 1964 as the training arm of the Arthur D. Little consulting firm, became an independent not-for-profit organisation in 1997 with an open recruitment policy, but maintained close ties with the parent company. The School is the only corporate university known to have regional accreditation in the United States. Arthur D. Little itself is currently in Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection and in the midst of being split up and sold, but the School is affected only insofar as its associated companies will be under new ownership. In other countries, such as India and Canada, consortia of private companies have sponsored the creation of private higher education initiatives in order to obtain more of the skilled personnel they require; these may not be corporate universities in a precise sense, but they are another form of hybrid institution. A further form competition could take is the effective relocation of areas of higher

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2 This section draws on and seeks to extend the work of Eddie Blass at Derbyshire Business School (University of Derby). Details of her work can be found in the references at the end of the report.

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education from public universities to newly formed corporate universities serving industries like health, education and welfare in the public sector. At this point it is impossible to anticipate how such rivalries will unfold - not least because much depends on the responsiveness of public universities, and their willingness to engage with corporate customers and to provide contextualized programs. This brings us to the third possibility, collaboration.

5.3 Collaboration

Collaboration in this context will primarily be a matter of working with corporate customers. We noted in Section 3 that attempts to rationalize the sourcing of services from universities and other educational providers is a common feature of corporate university initiatives. Characteristically, decisions that had been made independently at lower levels within separate business units are dealt with at corporate level in order to achieve a notion of improved quality or return on investment (e.g., strategic fit, a common vocabulary across the organization, economies of scale). At the same time, many corporate universities have built up their own capacities for the in-house provision of management and leadership development, often buying in the best available expertise from universities and consultancies on an ad-hoc basis. In consequence, these training and development activities have become increasingly sophisticated. The training manager of yore may have been easily impressed by academic staff, but the head of a corporate university, often an academic by training, will run a much more critical eye over who and what is proposed (and may anyway only be interested in cherry-picking academic stars as occasional contributors to the corporate university’s programs). The implications of these two trends do seem fairly clear: corporate universities are likely to be more informed and demanding customers of university programs.

Patterns of collaboration are also likely to reflect the trend towards distance learning in its various forms. Consistent messages and vocabularies are important in developing common understandings across nationally and internationally dispersed companies, and distance learning offers cost-effective ways of working towards such standardisation. Hence, some corporate universities choose to collaborate with universities having expertise in e- and distance learning, and when they do so, the size of the contracts involved are correspondingly great. The experience of the Open University with the COROUS initiative (http://www.corous.com) and the number of e-learning suppliers around the world (such as Cardean University – http://www.cardean.com) indicates that large corporations are willing to work with credible collaborators, if the universities can engage with client needs.

This brings us to the final point that this report seeks to make. Co-operation between public universities and other societal institutions is a difficult and complex process, as the many accounts of research funded by commercial companies emphasise (Aronowitz 2000; Buchbinder 1993; Marginson and Considine 2000). Negotiation of, for example, publication rights for scientific knowledge produced, or curriculum content in management courses, can be problematic, and may even result in the quiet death of a project if there is no consensus. However, if corporate universities are not to become competitors, and if collaboration is not to be forced on the educational sector by state regulation, it may be that some voluntary cooperation on the part of public universities can provide a middle ground. Universities have rarely been isolated from the societies that they reflect, serve, and are protected by (Derrida 1983); corporate universities are becoming an established part of these societies. To deny this, and to refuse to engage with them and the people running them, would be at best shortsighted, and at worst potentially damaging.
6 Conclusions

For at least a century centres of higher learning in Europe have been subject to one cultural expectation that is stronger than any other – a degree of distance from other societal institutions. This has been conceptualized in a number of ways: sometimes through the notion of academic freedom, sometimes by reference to the ‘ivory tower’ cliché of working life in universities, and sometimes, indeed, by universities themselves seeking limited ‘engagement’. However, the constant underlying these various perspectives is that universities are a milieu apart, whether spatially, structurally, or culturally. We would suggest that corporate universities have the potential to change this understanding, and also the practice of how public universities and multinationals interact.

As we outlined in the introduction and Section one, the corporate sector and publicly owned work organizations are much more than just key clients for business schools – infrastructure support, research funding, sponsorship for chairs, and research access are all aspects of the industry-university dynamic. Corporate universities, by blurring the boundaries between education and business further than before (and in new ways), have the potential to impact on all of these areas of interaction. It appears at the time of writing that corporate universities may provide impetus towards the re-definition of institutional conditions that universities work within.

However, the processes of structural change can be seen, when looking at corporate universities conceptually, as part of a dynamic historical tradition, rather than as a temporally isolated initiative. Thus, we can trace the development of corporate schools and universities through distinct periods of focus since the earliest initiatives. As Eurich demonstrates, the first corporate educational initiatives of the 19th century concentrated on providing job-related skills training as the state was too slow to develop appropriate learning opportunities. This phase can be seen as providing an alternative (almost in opposition) to state provision, in which corporate aims were the primary goal.

The second phase is defined by a complimentarity in the two systems. Wiggenhorn, for example, emphasizes how Motorola U (founded in the 1970s) focused on providing skills that had not been fully assimilated during compulsory state education, such as basic literacy or numeracy. In this phase, nascent corporate university and schools operated in a way that emphasized adding to state education, rather than providing an alternative. The third phase may be seen in the development of training and enculturation ‘boot camps’, as initiatives such as GE’s Crotonville establishment have been termed (see http://www.ge.com/news/podium_papers/crotonville.htm – see also Tichy 2001 for an account of this initiative from an academic seconded to a corporate university). These institutions - what we have referred to as the chateau experience - are best seen primarily as a means of bringing the individual employee into close contact with the corporate practices and value systems of organizations with very strong ‘cultures of control’. They bear little relation to the public education system, and can operate in isolation from it.

The fourth and present phase, we would suggest, is the current one. Contemporary corporate universities, and particularly those that have appeared in the last five years, emphasize two aspects of managing people. First, much of the promotional discourse revolves around the need for large companies to aspire to become learning organizations in order to achieve and maintain competitive advantage. Second, and related to this first area, many accounts of managing corporate universities refer to a perceived need to manage knowledge. The close relations with existing educational providers, the focus on theories of individual and organizational learning, and the potential to operate as centres of Mode 2 knowledge production, all indicate that contemporary corporate universities are a significant innovation in organizational practice within a wider societal context.
Further reading

Selection of corporate university websites (some within the body of the report):


The Disney Institute: http://disney.go.com/vacations/websites/disneyinstitution/

Barclays University: http://www.barclays-university.com/

Motorola U: http://mu.motorola.com/

The BT Academy: http://www.groupbt.com/society/education/btacademy/index.htm

BAe Systems Virtual University: http://www.baesystems.com/virtualuniversity/virtualuniversity.htm

Cap Gemini Ernst & Young University: http://www.cgey.com/U/index.shtml

Tennessee Valley Authority University: http://www.tva.gov/tvau/index.htm

Clearly, there are many others; on this short list are some of the better known and longer established with websites that are either open or informative.

Management and business oriented analyses of corporate universities:


Educational analyses of corporate university:


Selected practitioner accounts of corporate university practice:


Additional references


In addition, a number of US doctoral dissertations have examined individual programmes and relations between corporations and universities in partnership, providing detailed accounts of the potential dangers and rewards of collaboration:


