



STRATEGIC & EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Competitive Threats: Your Content Is Commoditised. Your Context Isn't

For-profit learning platforms now compete directly for member education revenue. Your advantage sits elsewhere

Continuing professional education, one of the most valuable and historically reliable pillars of association membership value, no longer competes only against other associations. Large for-profit online learning platforms and publishers now offer credible alternatives in the same space, and this is a real, structural competitive shift worth the board's deliberate attention rather than an assumption that member loyalty alone will hold.

Which rules apply to your association?

The law depends on how your association is set up. A **company limited by guarantee** follows the Corporations Act 2001 (Cth) and its constitution. An **incorporated association** follows its state or territory associations Act and its rules. A **registered charity** also follows the ACNC Act and the ACNC Governance Standards, and some Corporations Act rules are replaced for charities that are companies. Check your own governing documents, and get advice before decisions with legal consequences.

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The Real Shift, Tested Severely During The Pandemic

During the pandemic many associations reported that member education remained in demand even as budgets, staffing, and other services came under severe pressure, a sign that the underlying need for professional development has not diminished. What has changed is the competitive field around meeting that need. Associations now compete not just with each other but with large-scale online learning platforms and publishers offering courses in overlapping subject areas, often at lower cost and with broader accessibility than a traditional association program.

An Important, Honest Caveat Worth Including

It is worth resisting an overhyped version of this threat as well. Some education researchers have questioned exaggerated claims about online learning disruption, arguing that some of these platforms represent an incremental evolution of distance education rather than a revolutionary threat, and that removing structured educator guidance in favour of purely self-directed learning can be a regressive step for skill development, not a straightforward improvement. A board should take the competitive threat seriously without assuming the most dramatic version of the disruption narrative is automatically the accurate one. The differentiator an association holds is not the content itself, since content is now commoditised. It is the professional context, peer connection, and accreditation weight surrounding that content, precisely the elements a generic online course cannot easily replicate.

Why This Connects Directly To The Value Proposition Discussion Already Held

This competitive pressure connects directly to the membership value proposition discussion earlier in this series. An association's defensible advantage over a generic online learning platform lies specifically in what the platform cannot easily replicate: professional context specific to the industry, peer connection and networking, and formal accreditation or credentialing weight recognised within the profession. Check whether CPD requirements for your profession are set by a regulator or registration board, and how your programs are recognised under them, since that affects how defensible this advantage is. A board should deliberately reinforce these specific differentiators in how education programs are designed and marketed, rather than assuming member loyalty alone will protect this revenue and engagement stream indefinitely.

- Take stock of where for-profit online platforms and publishers now compete directly with your association's continuing education offerings, rather than assuming this competition is negligible.
- Resist an overhyped version of the disruption narrative, recognising that some researchers have questioned exaggerated claims about online learning's superiority or inevitability.
- Deliberately reinforce the specific advantages an association holds, professional context, peer connection, and accreditation weight, in how education programs are designed and communicated.
- Connect this competitive assessment directly to the membership value proposition testing discussed earlier in this series, since education competitiveness is a direct component of that broader value question.
- Monitor member enrolment and engagement in continuing education specifically as a leading indicator, since a decline here often signals a competitive threat before it shows up in overall membership numbers.

Continuing education competition from non-traditional providers is a real, structural shift worth board-level strategic attention, not a passing trend to wait out. The associations best positioned to respond are the ones that understand which of their advantages a generic platform cannot replicate, and invest deliberately in strengthening exactly those, rather than trying to compete on content and price alone. This is one of the practical governance topics built into our Association CEO course, alongside the papers, tools and frameworks that turn the principle into your board's actual practice. [Explore the course](#)

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BOARDROOM ACTION WORKSHEET

Competitive Threats: Your Content Is Commoditised. Your Context Isn't

Turn the resource into evidence, a decision and an accountable next step. Keep the completed record in your association's approved board records system.

1 What is the issue or decision?

State the governance question in one clear sentence.

2 What evidence do we already have?

Record the facts, source documents and stakeholder evidence available now.

3 What evidence is still needed?

Identify the legal, regulatory, financial, member or operational information still required.

4 What is the agreed next action?

Capture the owner, timeframe and how the matter will return to the board.

Action owner	Review date	Board decision or resolution

General education, not legal, financial, tax, clinical or governance advice. Confirm specifics at the relevant primary source or with your own qualified adviser. Nexus Leadership is operated by Lipstick Consulting Pty Ltd · ABN 15 619 120 482.

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