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**Meeting the challenge of different cultures and educational systems –
the IDEA League**

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Abstract

Meeting the challenge of different cultures and educational systems – the IDEA League

A university network of four European technical universities, the IDEA League, was formed, five years ago, promoting structural exchange of ideas and expertise. The collaboration resulted in the establishment of common educational quality-management principles and joint academic profiles of graduates, but the alliance also shares best practice and does benchmarking in areas other than education, e.g. in communications, international activities and collaboration with industry. This paper will discuss the differences that arise from national systems and cultural backgrounds of universities located in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK. We will show how an alliance addresses these differences, how it influences the collaboration and how to build an identity as an alliance.

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The alliance

We will review the IDEA League, a consortium of universities situated in different European countries but with a common background: when building this partnership, an important premise was the shared theme science and technology. The IDEA League consists of four major technical universities, *Imperial College London*, Technische Universiteit (TU) *Delft*, *Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) Zürich*, Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule (RWTH) *Aachen* that are large providers of university engineering education in their country. The alliance was formed by signing a memorandum of understanding in October 1999. Together these four universities have over 85,000 staff and students, and out of these three quarters are students (for more details on student numbers per university see Table 1). This staff-student ratio shows how important students are to a university and therefore the attractiveness of a university is a major concern. In view of this, building networks with other universities becomes an interesting option because it may offer additional opportunities for students, for example for mobility and joint activities, and for the university itself it provides a means of continuous development and improvement by comparing its operation with partners.

In the case of the IDEA League, strategic considerations, learning from each other, sharing expertise and benchmarking were the driving force in setting up the alliance. At first there was specific interest in evaluating co-operations in the educational features of a university. Since education is mainly dependent on the national system and thus not international by nature, the opportunities for collaboration with other universities and learning from each other are advantageous to all. A comparison of the quality-assurance systems in place became the starting point of the alliance, leading to a comparison of study programmes, especially in view of the introduction of the bachelor-master structure as requested by the Bologna declaration of the European ministers of education. Subsequently, the collaboration resulted in the establishment of joint educational quality management principles including the definition of competence profiles of graduates in many different study areas. These profiles of high standards are an important selling factor for graduates because these graduates in science and technology will look for employment on the international market and are faced with the recognition of their degrees in other countries. Essentially, a new brand name – valid not only for one university but a group of universities – is developed that hence, transgresses the national educational systems. In science and technology, we find that research also plays an important rôle and considerably enhances the brand name of a university.

Henkel (2005) points out that ‘among university scientists research is regarded as essential to academic identity’. Indeed, research is the main driver at these IDEA universities and on average about 50% of each partner’s income is invested in research. Research is commonly considered to

function in an international context and consequently, internationalisation is high on the agenda of these universities. A significant percentage of foreign professors might be expected when looking for internationalisation of research, but we find that only ETH has over 50%. This may be because Switzerland is a multilingual country (Büttner 2004), but nonetheless in general we find that mobility in research is more characteristic for the doctorate and postdoc positions. When looking at employment we see the internationalisation of research confirmed by the rather high percentage of international doctorate students at the IDEA institutions in contrast to the rather low number of international non-doctorate students (Table 1). Noting that internationalisation inevitably coincides with research, and that it is the norm to have international collaboration, why do we want alliances when such a collaboration already exists?

	Imperial College London (Imperial)	Delft University of Technology (TU Delft)	ETH Zürich (ETH)	RWTH Aachen (RWTH)
Country	UK	The Netherlands	Switzerland	Germany
Number of full-time students (excl. doctorate students)	9,042	13,382	9,976	25,406
International students	33%	13%	7%	18%
Doctorate students	19%	6%	20%	12%
International doctorate students	50%	40%	50%	15%
International professors	17%	13%	58%	8%
Selection at entrance to undergraduate level	yes	no	no	no
Tuition fee	~€4,500/year for EU students and ~€20,000/year for non EU-students	~€1,500/year for EU students and ~€8,000/year for non EU-students	~€800/year	none

*Table 1:
Facts & figures of IDEA universities in 2004 (source: annual reports of universities)*

National policy on university governance

The rôle of universities has changed considerably in the last decades, since business has entered the academic world. In principal, for technical universities there is a longstanding link between academia and industry given by the continuous attention to create spin off from the knowledge created at the universities, but this normally did not concern the governance of a university. However, in recent years the management of universities changed and it now deals with quality assurance, accountability, corporate image and so forth – essentially, the patterns and mechanisms found in the industrial environment are increasingly used as a model for universities. This move requires universities to rethink their values, their identity, their agenda, and their multifaceted relationships. As Henkel (2005)

indicates, higher-education institutions are confronted with ‘unprecedented government steerage and scrutiny but also have to locate themselves and compete in various forms of market’. Hence, universities look for new ways in their operation. As in the business world, universities build alliances, and as in the business world, issues such as internationalisation and globalisation become important topics. As a consequence, there is a great number of university alliances and we find that the majority of those are international (Teather 2004).

To a large extent, differences are enforced by the national educational systems and in the case of the IDEA League the different approaches to tuition fees are striking. Table 1 shows that the British system has the highest fees followed by the Netherlands and then Switzerland. Further, the countries have rather different policies towards non-EU students. Whereas Germany does not differentiate between EU and non-EU there is a different view on this in the UK and the Netherlands. The Dutch adopted this differentiation rather recently whilst the UK has a longstanding policy of distinguishing for non-EU students. In the 80s, with the move to mass education, the UK promoted this approach of making higher education a business. It is now established policy in the UK and is underlined by the high number of international undergraduate students at Imperial (Table 1). This coincides with a change of attitude towards the students who are more treated as customers in an environment of high tuition fees expecting adequate tutoring support. In contrast you have the German system in which the students are more left to their own devices to find their way through the system with little support. It is the Humboldt approach of academia in the German-speaking countries versus the more business-driven education in the UK and the Netherlands. With this difference in policy on tuition fee it is clearly not opportune for the IDEA League to consider joint recruitment of students overseas, because they are competitors. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the establishment of other joint activities that could be envisaged such as language testing or collaboration in research.

A result of these different cultures in education can also be found in the differences in study lengths in which the German graduates take on average one to two years longer for their study than their British counterparts. Furthermore, this different educational style is mirrored in the ministries’ approach towards the management of the universities: in the IDEA League institutions we find that at Imperial and TU Delft, the rector and president, respectively, come from business whereas at ETH and RWTH they are from academia. However, changes in the German higher-education system can be expected because recently the German Supreme Court ruled that tuition fees can be introduced. We see that to a large extent the universities are dependent on the government policy. In the following, the paper will discuss what might be the underlying facets of these different cultures, the challenges a university alliance, embedded in different national systems, faces and how such a network copes with these peculiarities.

Cultural differences

Tuition fees and selection are features in which the universities depend on the national policy. It might be assumed that selection at entrance to university follows the pattern of tuition fee, but is currently only found at Imperial. In Germany and Switzerland, it might be expected that there is no selection because of the Humboldt ethos and the general idea of freedom and right of education. It is rather surprising that there is no similarity between the Netherlands and the UK, but this different behaviour might be related to the pronounced ‘feminine society’. Hofstede (2002; ITIM 1995) introduced this value system of masculinity/femininity in which masculine societal values are dominated by achievements and success whereas femininity stands for caring for others and quality of life. Figure 1 shows that the Netherlands has a low value, 14, in contrast to Germany, Switzerland and the UK with values at the other end of the scale, around 70. This femininity aspect might also explain why at Dutch universities there is a high number of student associations and student societies organising many activities for students not only outside the study but also in connection with the study. A major part of financial support for this system comes from government sources.

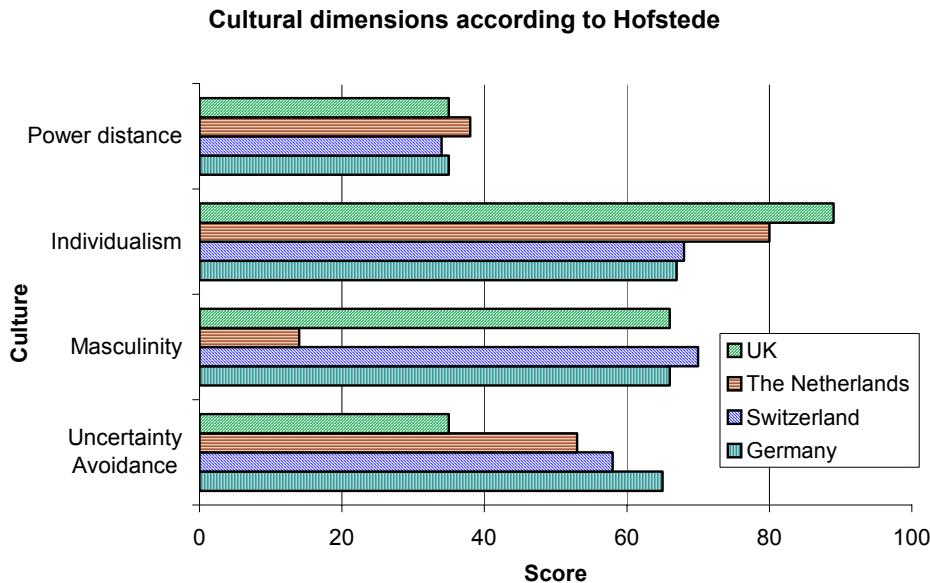


Figure 1: Cultural dimensions according to Hofstede (2002; ITIM 1995) of the countries in which IDEA universities are embedded.

In order to better understand the alliance it will be useful to follow further this line of Hofstede’s cultural values (Hofstede 2002) and look at the other values suggested by his study: power distance, individualism and uncertainty avoidance. We find much less diversity between the IDEA partners for power distance and individualism. A low power distance indicates that all have equal rights, superiors are accessible, hierarchy is more for convenience and the change goes by evolution and not revolution (ITIM 1995). Actually, these similar values in power distance (Figure 1 shows that it is around 35 for the four countries) might be one of the reasons why the alliance works well together. One might inquire how the collaboration would work with a partner situated in a country with a power distance on the opposite end of the scale, like for example Belgium (65) or France (68).

In Hofstede’s individualism, we find that people look after themselves and their immediate family only, whereas in collectivism people belong to in-groups who look after them in exchange for loyalty. Although there is no great diversity between the countries, the UK has the highest value and thus represents a rather individualistic society. Using this interpretation we find that the UK system adapts less to the features requested in the Bologna process than the others. Our discussions between the partner institutions also show this British behaviour at Imperial which is more reluctant to follow the ‘Bologna’ bachelor-master system.

Uncertainty avoidance – exhibiting how people feel threatened by uncertainty and try to avoid these situation – is also diverse between the four countries. A high value here suggests a need for law and rules, coupled with an inner urge to work hard, a need for consensus and thus higher stress. Germany has the highest score with 65 and the UK the lowest with 35 and this can be found back in the educational systems. When comparing the educational landscapes between Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK our discussions in the alliance showed that Germany has more rules and regulation in their higher education system than the others. The UK system seems to be case-by-case rather than prescribed rules.

A major characteristic of a culture is its language and very often we believe that this also indicates rather similar cultural systems. However, when looking at populations in different countries that share a common language, such as the Dutch and Flemish, there are sensitive intercultural differences. Hofstede’s (2002) study shows that in Belgium we find a power distance value of 65 and a

masculinity value of 54, i.e. rather different from the values in the Netherlands with 38 and 14, respectively. This shows that it is important to become familiar with cultural differences and the subtleties in 'neighbouring' cultures: a common language does not mean the same culture.

How does knowledge of these cultural values of a country affect university education? As we saw earlier, education is strongly steered by the national system. Therefore, by knowing about the cultural values of a country we can better understand how a university functions. Our discussions have become apprehensive of the differences and we can stand back, negotiate with less emotional attachment and be able to find acceptable frameworks in which we can collaborate. Despite its perception of longstanding tradition, culture is not static but moves continuously, at present even rather rapidly with education becoming more international and today's easy means of interactions not only between countries but also between continents. The study by Hofstede (2002) is based on data collected in the 1970s and we have to be aware that this scheme represents one way of interpreting the many facets of the education landscapes which might have, at least partially, changed in the meantime. As we saw earlier in the example of tuition fee, a convergence can be expected resulting in fee-paying in general. In addition, the Bologna process suggests common frameworks and thus fosters the interaction of countries concerning their educational policy. In the long run, this should result in changes to the educational policies of a country and value systems of the universities.

All in all, the national and cultural differences have an inspiring effect, namely, to learn from each other 'how somebody else deals with it', and therefore trust is built more easily. Language is the most apparent difference in cultures, and it is vital to have a policy on this in an alliance. The countries involved in this alliance root in Germanic languages, but from the beginning, it was agreed that English will be the language of communication. However, this does not mean that communication is without any difficulties. Continuous awareness of how a particular word is understood might even be more vital because it is believed that one speaks a common language. However, a specific English word as used in another culture might have a different connotation, and we continuously need to find expressions that can be supported by all. This also forces the native English speakers to become aware of the subtleties of their local expressions. It is not just a question of 'good' English but finding expressions which are jointly understood. A certain amount of time needs to be set aside to establish acceptable final versions of agreements, etc.

Building an identity as an alliance

How can we build a partnership amongst universities which are also competing? Evidently, the common background of engineering education between the IDEA League institutions helps in building a partnership and in developing a joint institutional identity. From the beginning of the alliance, the educational systems were compared, resulting in the establishment of common educational quality management principles, leading to mutual recognition of degrees with the aim of enhancing student mobility as part of the curriculum. This meant that in the first two years, the collaboration mainly took place in the academic world of the universities and was not carried far beyond the working groups. There is a regular newsletter but there was no identification with the alliance. It became apparent that there was a lack of awareness about the IDEA League at each institution.

The most sensible way of strengthening the partnership was setting up an IDEA League website, since this provides a means by which we can communicate about the IDEA League at a distance. This sounds rather straightforward, at least from the academic part of the university who consider the web as their world having embraced it from its start. However, when setting up a website, a certain image of the alliance, its visual identity, is displayed and transmitted. The logos of the four IDEA institutions do not differ much but putting a series of logos together does not create a common image. Finally, despite some different views in the beginning, it was agreed that the visual identity should be developed before setting up the website.

With the visual identity in place the IDEA League website was set up and the group identity is steadily increasing. Clearly, we are still at the beginning, but staff and students at all four institutions are already more familiar with the IDEA League. Questions are not only raised by students but also by staff, and occasionally by industry and other organisations. As a consequence of the information available and the positive experience, the number of collaborations has widened to areas other than science. We have groups that come together on issues such as communications, admissions, international activities, equality issues, etc. People are realising the potential of the collaboration, using the partners as a reference framework. The web makes it easier to provide information, reference and benchmarking opportunities in a network collaboration without a physical centre.

Nonetheless, we are faced with the situation of allying the values of the individual institutions, a brand name that has developed for itself over decades (if not centuries), and now building the identity of an alliance. Henkel (2005) says 'academic identity is integrally related with autonomy'. Does this now hinder the building of an identity of an alliance? There is the misconception that an alliance requires an approach of harmonisation, and harmony is a measure of success. Bannerman et al. (2005) correctly point out that 'tensions are a natural occurrence in a close working relationship between partners with otherwise different interest'. For an alliance, it is important to see and respect the differences. We aim at the establishment of a transparent system which opens new opportunities. For example, with the introduction of joint competence-profiles for bachelor graduates in the IDEA League, students can easily move to a partner university for their masters. In addition, a scholarship scheme was put into place encouraging this mobility, that in some sense goes against the practice of a university that wants to keep its best students. However, for the master graduates it opens more possibilities and makes them more attractive for employment.

By learning from each other and thus being able to find a framework of collaboration we can go beyond the established system. In principle, the academic world is used to pursuing joint interests in the field of science, where joint research applications are common. This is only possible when being open and being prepared to share information, essentially to have trust in the partner. Non-scientific personnel are less accustomed to sharing knowledge, because on a national level there may be competition with other national institutions. However, in a comparison with other countries competition is not for the same funds.

To function properly a partnership must avoid an additional administrative super-structure. There is already plenty of accountability and it is often rather ambiguous who are actually the 'users' of this (Hellström 2004). There can be a conflict between the top-down in which the managers/leaders of the university push for certain results and the bottom-up approach in which staff are less inclined to follow the suggested strategy. Therefore, a collective action is required and many different groups need to be brought in contact in order to foster collaboration and to build a knowledge network. We saw that the web formed a basis to disseminate information and helped to raise the awareness of the alliance. However, there is information you do not want to share with the world outside the alliance, but which is important to its members. Thus, we are currently establishing an intranet for an easy access to the information collected over the whole alliance. Knowing that it is also not easy to communicate effectively within one institution we are aware that continuous effort is required to advance the relationship. As Bannerman et al. (2005) indicate 'a successful alliance is more than luck' it is something you have to work on continuously and you develop new skills how to deal with your partners from your previous experience. They also point out that it is not only knowing about the partners but 'learning from partners is paramount'.

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