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Are competition and collaboration compatible?

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Abstract

One of the responses to increasing competition in higher education is the trend to set up consortia of universities. The IDEA League (Imperial College London, TU Delft, ETH Zürich, RWTH Aachen), an alliance of four leading European technical universities, collaborates to learn from each other, share expertise and experience. We will discuss how this alliance copes with the competitive aspects when collaborating on strategic issues. How do you promote the alliance when you are also competitors? How do you build a new brand name with four universities each having a strong identity? For this, an important factor is the cultural and organisational context of the four universities. Common educational quality management principles have been established which led to mutual recognition of degrees with the key aim of enhancing student mobility as part of the curriculum. This common approach provides input for the development of a joint image, but we still have to deal with the fact that all four universities want to attract, and keep, the best students. We would like to provide examples of how an alliance of universities circumvents these issues to establish a group identity. The alliance strives to establish a framework overcoming damaging aspects of competition and focusing on group culture in collaboration.

Introduction

Higher education institutions not only compete for the best students but also for the best academics. This competition is not particularly new for academics because they also compete for funding in research, the Nobel Prize and so forth. At the same time they are also accustomed to collaborating because they progress by sharing knowledge and sometimes facilities. However, only recently have academics been confronted with the language of the corporate communications world of for-profit organisations which look at not only the outcome of the scientific results, but also the image, the ‘brand’ of a university. Enhancing a university’s particular image and developing a brand name is a consequence of the competition in the higher education market, as Moore (Moore 2004) points out: “At root, a brand is the promise of an experience. Understanding and communicating the validity of that experience to target audiences are parts of the branding process.”

In the following we wish to discuss how a network of four major European universities deals with competition in order to build up a group identity. We see that commonality between the partners provides an impetus for building a group image. Further, we discuss how they learn from each other, especially with regard to cultural differences and see how this relates to conflicting aspects of competition and collaboration. Finally, a number of paradoxes are presented that are encountered when institutional identity is promoted.

Image of the individual universities

A basis of the IDEA League universities' collaboration is their common background: these four universities, *Imperial College London*, *Technische Universiteit (TU) Delft*, *Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) Zürich*, *Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule (RWTH) Aachen*, are a large, in some cases even the largest, provider of university engineering education in their country. Science and technology is the theme they have in common which provides an important factor to understanding each other. In addition to this, we find that Imperial and RWTH have medicine in their study programme, and further, RWTH offers studies in languages, economics and social sciences. Student numbers are also similar at the four universities, see table 1, with the exception of RWTH. This is partially due to its additional subjects.

Table 1:

Some figures from IDEA universities: number of students and tuition fees (source: annual reports or websites of universities).

	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 in 2003	10,336	13,417	12,626	30,946 (out of these 2/3 are in science, technology, and medicine)
Tuition fee	~ €2,000/year for EU students and ~ €20,000/year for non EU-students	~ €1,500/year for EU/EFTA students and ~ €8,000/year for non EU-students	~ €800/year	none

For tuition fees (table 1), each partner has a completely different approach, enforced by the national education system and its political ethos. Germany has free education, whereas the UK and the Netherlands, and Switzerland to a lesser extent, charge fees. At Imperial and TU Delft, non-EU students have to pay even higher fees because the national system does not permit subsidy of foreign students. Scholarships are available: in the UK these are independent of the national system whereas in the Netherlands some scholarships are made available from national bodies. With the decreasing number of national students the competition to recruit students from foreign (non-EU) countries will increase, but it seems unlikely that the IDEA League partners collaborate to systematically recruit abroad. It appears sensible to shy away from a collaboration which will be difficult to handle and might not achieve the desired outcome.

Despite considerable differences in national systems, we can observe cohesion in the image of these four universities: when looking at the individual logos of the four universities one finds striking resemblance of style (Büttner 2003); the colours used are blue and black and the character types chosen are very much alike. However, according to Arpan *et al.* (Arpan *et al.* 2003 and references therein) an image cannot be projected by firms via messages and logos. There is a general consensus that an image is a concept based on a variety of factors as studies on the corporate image of for-profit organisations show. Nowadays, non-profit organisations, such as universities and the academic world, increasingly embrace the strategy of the corporate world for enhancement of their image and thus thinking about their brand name, reports Moore (Moore 2004).

Certainly, all four institutions have branding on the agenda. Three of the IDEA universities, Imperial, TU Delft, and ETH went through a branding exercise one or two years ago; at RWTH it took place

about ten years ago. Imperial's branding, for which they won a Silver Medal in the CASE Circle of Excellence Awards Program 2003 (CASE 2004), included a name change from 'Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine' to 'Imperial College London' as a consequence of research during the branding exercise. Hence, all four partners have now the location, another commonality, and three have the word 'technical' as part of their name, in the language of their home country.

At some stage non-English universities require a translation of their name. TU Delft and RWTH use a more literal translation into English with Delft University of Technology and RWTH Aachen University, but ETH Zürich becomes Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich. Looking at the English version we find a slightly more pronounced difference between the four. With this in mind and also in view of the importance of having the location of the university in the brand name, how can we achieve an identification with the League going beyond the individual institution?

Building a group identity

Identification is viewed as a communicative process and plays an important role in holding virtual teams together realising desired outcomes (Connaughton and Daly 2004 and references therein). Choosing accessibility and information equity as their two communication variables in a study on identification with distant leaders, Connaughton and Daly show that, next to accessibility and perceived information equity, trust plays an important role in distant settings. Indeed, trust building is significant in all the ongoing collaborations in the IDEA League. The rather similar backgrounds and images of the four certainly help in this respect. We experience that people are able to recognise themselves to some extent in the image of the partner universities, with the consequence that the collaborative aspect comes more to the fore leaving the competitive aspects in the background.

As we saw earlier, there are a number of similarities between the IDEA League institutions that can be built on to develop a joint institutional identity, but there are also features which need to be developed as a joint product. From the beginning of the alliance, at the end of 1999, the educational systems were compared, resulting in the establishment of common educational quality management principles (Büttner 2002), leading to mutual recognition of degrees with the key 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 was (and is) a regular newsletter but there was no identification with the alliance. The communication, as described by Connaughton and Daly, was not in place. It became apparent that there was a lack of awareness about the IDEA League at each institution. Thus, the communications groups of the universities became involved in the IDEA League and were asked to develop a communication plan.

Setting up a website was the most sensible way in a 'virtual university', 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 because they embraced it from its start. However, when setting up a website, a certain image of the alliance, its visual identity, is displayed and transmitted. Despite some different views in the beginning, the communications group proposal that the visual identity should be developed before setting up the website, was accepted. For this, it was useful that the individual universities had just been or were still, involved in the rebranding of their own institution. This might suggest that such internal information from institutions might be treated confidentially, but this was not the case, due to the geographical situation. Indeed, all four partners compete in attracting the best students, but in the first instance they do this in their national environment. The national and cultural differences arising from each partner have a more inspiring effect, namely, to learn from each other 'how somebody else deals with it', and therefore trust is built easily.

With the visual identity in place the IDEA League website was set up and knowledge of the group identity is steadily increasing. Clearly, we are only at the beginning but people in all four institutions

are already more familiar with the IDEA League. We receive questions not only from students but also from staff. The number of working groups has also increased. This is not only due to the number of years the IDEA League has existed, but is also a consequence of the information available. 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. Benchmarking implies a competitive aspect because the achievements of the group are compared. We consider this a healthy aspect of competition which encourages all partners to continuously improve, and hence does not hinder the collaboration between the partners.

Learning from the experience of others

Obviously each university has a different organisational structure and it is not always clear who is the best representative for a specific task, or how to organise the job when you do not work in proximity. The website is operated on a four-monthly roster between the partners and there are regular meetings to discuss progress and set new targets. Certainly, an advantage is the rather small number of participants in a working group, normally there is one representative per university and occasionally two. With about five to six people in a group, an efficient, but also informal, collaboration is achieved. There is little competition and good collaboration prevails: expertise is exchanged. A good example is the introduction of barrier-free access to websites. The UK was one of the first European countries to introduce legislation for web accessibility in higher education to people with disabilities. Thus, through Imperial's involvement and expertise the other partners successively adapted their websites accordingly.

Bardach (Bardach 2004) says that you can do four things with the good practice of others: replicate it, adapt it, experiment with it, or get some further ideas that are inspired by it. In the IDEA League we continuously search for good practice or interesting ideas about successful mechanisms that might be adapted at home. This happens over a wide spectrum, not only in the academic arena but also in admissions, communications, equality issues and so forth. Direct discussion about your work with your partners is a positive experience because you are ready and motivated for doing it. This could be considered a bottom-up approach. In contrast, a benchmarking exercise is often requested from the top (a top-down approach) and may be perceived negatively. However, any transfer of good practice needs to be considered within its context, and this becomes an issue in an alliance with different cultures and national systems.

It is also an advantage that the four partner universities are situated in different countries because they do not compete for national resources. Certainly, this gives readiness and willingness to learn from each other and to share expertise. Competitive aspects are encountered when dealing with items which lie outside the national boundaries, e.g. recruitment of students abroad. It is opportune to address such issues openly. In general we find that being open reduces incompatibility between competition and collaboration. In meetings native English-speakers have an advantage, and can sometimes dominate. There is enough appreciation on both sides of how to handle this that it rarely leads to difficulties. In the long run both sides profit: the English of the non-native speakers improves and they learn more about the subtleties in English, whereas the English speakers learn to adapt their vocabulary and allow for cultural differences. The commonalities reported earlier strongly support trust building and allow for the recognition of each others' achievements. In this way a framework is built to overcome the competition and to focus on collaboration. Nevertheless, there remain interesting paradoxes when promoting identity in universities.

Paradoxes

1. 'Culture' normally implies people from different nations and ethnic groups, but there is also the culture of professions. In higher education institutions we are faced with the division

between academics and non-academics. For people in communications this represents a continuous challenge.

2. Ironically, those who find a career in science rather attractive often find communication of science to the general public a less attractive proposition. This needs continuous attention in identifying the correct individuals when promoting universities.
3. In recent years, science communication has become more important and the question of ‘what constitutes news?’ needs to be dealt with in each university. In the IDEA League, we notice considerable differences when we look at the newsworthiness of a topic. Comparing the news fed by the four partners for the events section on the web we also find remarkable difference in what is considered news. It seems that in the UK, scientific results of interest to the general public are considered more important than special events occurring at a particular institution.
4. “Cultures consist of the shared cognitive and material items that forge a group’s identity and ensure its survival. Culture is created, shared and transmitted through communication”, say Nixon and Dawson (Nixon and Dawson 2002). Should one of our targets be the development of an IDEA League culture? In the working groups we are continuously faced with cultural differences, and being aware of these is important in order to effectively communicate. English is the accepted language of communication in the IDEA League but we must understand that there is a wide variety of perceptions in the understanding of certain key words. The English vocabulary used by non-native English speakers is obviously more restricted than that of native English speakers who use all the subtleties and cultural components of their language. This gives efficient communication in the IDEA League an additional twist. There could be a positive aspect to this: Steiner (Steiner 2001) suggests that “too much efficiency and professionalism in communication can involve a narrowing of vision, a denial of human capacities like intuition, feeling and creativity, a restriction on interpretive and operational freedom, and an imposition of an identity that denies the value of human uniqueness”. Thus, being part of an international alliance seems to be a good approach.

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