LDE centres: sprint or marathon?

The aim of the Strategic Leiden-Delft-Erasmus Alliance, established by the three universities in 2012, was to improve research and education and competitiveness. Projects are intended to develop from the ground up, which led to the establishment of eight joint centres in 2013. A quick look around reveals that lack of time is proving to be their key obstacle.

Enthusiasm and inspiration

The researchers in most of the centres have already discovered how inspirational it is to look at the same subject with several colleagues from different fields. Take Global Heritage, as an example. It took nearly fifty discussions with researchers of all different kinds, but it is now clear how wide-ranging the centre actually is. Historians, economists, construction and civil engineers and many others have spread themselves across five research themes. The people involved seem to complement each other, which is a motivating factor.

Or take Education and Learning. This centre brought together people who hardly knew each other at all. The focus of government and universities on study success and online education has given new impetus to research into university education, but the mutual contact also appears to have a beneficial effect.

Another example is the ‘European Research Centre for Economic and Financial Governance’. In it, everyone is convinced of the fact that structural solutions for the economic and financial crisis cannot come from individual areas of research. Integrated solutions will be the winning formula.

Making progress

The centres each have their own strategy and pace. As one initiator says: while one centre will achieve numerous sprints, another will run a marathon. Almost all of the centres have already achieved their fair share of major and minor successes. Most of them have a relatively new website, the subject of cybersecurity on 6 November, and a newly built up network, formulated subthemes, appointed support staff, held workshops and events, organised congresses, developed curricula and submitted research proposals. For example, ‘Safety and Security’ has had two NWO research proposals approved, on cybersecurity and flood security. A conference was also held on the subject of cybersecurity on 6 November. Within ‘Metroplis and Mainport’, proposals are also being submitted to the NWO and the European Union. Subthemes have been selected, such as accessibility and synergy between port and city. For each theme, detailed road-maps are being developed to provide direction for the years ahead. The centre is also working to improve its name recognition by sponsoring a poster prize and organising workshops. After a shaky start, the Centre for Sustainability has now set itself a course within what is a very broad field. It is focusing on a relatively new area, the management of resource streams. On 4 November, it even had the honour of organising an event to accompany the meeting of the prestigious UNEP International Resource Panel in Rotterdam. Although cooperation of this kind is inspirational, it is not always easy.

Occasionally, researchers literally do not even speak the same language. There may also be differences of opinion on what defines success. Whereas one person may want to publish in a leading international journal as soon as possible, another may see a Dutch journal as a more appropriate platform. Collaboration with businesses may be second nature to one, but completely uncharted territory for another.

As one of the interviewees joked, a marathon can be a good match for Leiden academia is not necessary. However, researchers need to respect each other’s differences and their successes. That is the only way of making further progress. Experience has shown that the fact that the researchers come from different fields is a benefit. If there is overlap, it can often cause disagreement about who should do what.

The university marketing departments have already begun to become protective of their institutions’ images. As a result, it is no longer permitted to use the acronym LDE (for Leiden, Delft, Erasmus). Although everyone may not strictly abide by the rule, it can make it difficult for centres to sell themselves in a leading international journal as soon as possible, another may see a Dutch journal as a more appropriate platform. Collaboration with businesses may be second nature to one, but completely uncharted territory for another.

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minor, for example. There are also some obstacles that do not affect everyone. Governance would likely to introduce a joint Master. The aim is for it to be a state-of-the-art two-year multidisciplinary program featuring the best researchers from the three institutions, entrance requirements for students, its own location and internationalization. However, Leiden and Rotterdam are currently prohibited by law from offering a two-year Master’s programme. A solution is now being sought, but in the meantime the centre does not actually exist. Joint research has already been around for a while, argue the researchers, so a centre is not necessary for the time being. There is enough work to do.

Lack o’ time
Almost everyone suffers from a lack of time. Even if there is a lot of enthusiasm at the outset and numerous ideas for research and education, it is not easy to find the time. Of course, the research for the centre can be accommodated within the work an academic is already doing, but there are always additional duties in practice while the employment contract stays the same.

The innovators are on hand to make sure people stay the course. They keep the administrative work, such as building websites, organising events and writing future visions, separate from the people focusing on the substance. This is because the latter need to be able to do their work as smoothly as possible with minimum fuss to worry about. Otherwise, as has already happened, they will abandon the venture. That can leave the future of a centre, which is heavily dependent on the ideas of researchers, in the lurch.

The Centre for Frugal Innovation in Africa

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Iva Peia is exploring Zambia in search of initiatives for the Centre for Frugal Innovation in Africa (CFIA). The post-doc is the first researcher attached to the centre full-time. Peia is investigating which sustainable developments could be beneficial for African societies. “These new products not only need to be cheap, but also accepted by the population.” That is the aim of frugal innovation, a brand-new area of research. The idea is for the academic sector to make it possible for businesses to develop smart devices and services that make money and genuinely help inhabitants of developing countries to make progress in such areas as combating poverty or promoting healthcare. Peter Knorrings, Professor of Private Sector and Development (Erasmus University) is one of the founders.

Together with TU Delft’s Professor of Management of Technological Innovations Cees van Beers and André Leliveld (African Studies Centre in Leiden), he has been working on frugal innovations for quite some time. “When we heard about the strategic alliance, the penny dropped and so we decided to discuss the options. Looking back, I wonder why we did not do it sooner.”

The fact that there is chemistry between the approximately fifteen researchers involved is often cited as an important factor in their successful cooperation. This is because interdisciplinary research calls for a tolerant attitude towards other disciplines. Several times a year, they have brainstorming sessions to share ideas. They have already achieved concrete results. For example, a frugal thermometer has been developed by medical anthropologists at LUMC and industrial designers from Delft that enables people who cannot read to tell if someone has a fever. A student has already been able to visit Ghana to explore the options for selling a frugal weather station designed in Delft. These kinds of subprojects are working successfully, but the centre will only survive if it receives grants.

The CFIA has enough seed money from the steering group to last until late 2015, after which it will need to look after itself. There are already two concrete research proposals waiting for approval, one with the science-funding body NWO. That grant application already revealed the formal difficulties of operating as a centre, which expects to have one main applicant. That means that the subsidy is awarded to a single university, even though the research actually depends on three: it is not only in the Netherlands that people need time to become accustomed to this new alliance; in Europe as a whole, there is a lot of work to be done to improve the centre’s name recognition and that of frugal innovation in general. If that fails, the chance of major funding from the Horizon 2020 project will be minimal. The first round of applications is already complete, but the centre missed it. Leliveld: “It was simply too early. You can increase your chances of success in Europe by demonstrating success elsewhere, which was why we are opting to apply for grants in the Netherlands first. We will then build on that later.”

Roest can well remember walking around the car park behind the faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mathematics and Computer Science in 2010. He was in search of sunlight, pulling a cart with his self-designed solar panel and measuring equipment. He knew he had a success on his hands: a solar panel that can generate electricity and hot water. All he needed to do was prove it. But it was the start of autumn and the sky was overcast. “On the only sunny day there was, a crane was blocking out the sunlight. How can I ever get any good test results?”

“I need an artificial sun,” replied Roest to his own question. Now, over four years later, he tells his story, standing by just that kind of simulator. It is a three-by-two metre colossus that mimics sunlight with 98 percent accuracy. In 2014, Eternal Sun achieved an annual turnover in the region of a million euros and he has big ambitions. With good reason: the solar energy market is booming and new products need to be tested.

Before Roest had even graduated, it was already clear that his artificial sun would fill a gap in the market. As a centre, Eternal Sun expects to have one main applicant. That means that the subsidy is awarded to a single university, even though the research actually depends on three: it is not only in the Netherlands that people need time to become accustomed to this new alliance; in Europe as a whole, there is a lot of work to be done to improve the centre’s name recognition and that of frugal innovation in general. If that fails, the chance of major funding from the Horizon 2020 project will be minimal. The first round of applications is already complete, but the centre missed it. Leliveld: “It was simply too early. You can increase your chances of success in Europe by demonstrating success elsewhere, which was why we are opting to apply for grants in the Netherlands first. We will then build on that later.”

For his graduation project, Stefan Roest developed a solar panel. When he wanted to test it, the sun was nowhere to be found. There was no artificial sun available for sale, so he built his own. He had identified a gap in the market, as the success of Roest’s company Eternal Sun demonstrates.

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With a friend from the Virgili student association, SEPAD student Chokri Moussaoudi, he drew up a quotation and quickly set up his own company. It was the right move. “We had more customers in no time. We joined up with YesDelft (the TU Delft incubator for start-ups) and hired two people.” Things continued to move fast. “We received an order for three units from South Korea. It took nine of us eight months to build them.” Business then started to go quiet. “We had not focused enough on marketing. It was touch-and-go for a while. Fortunately, new projects quickly emerged in Turkey, India and the Netherlands.” Last year, the company struggled to deal with the sheer number of requests. That was why Roest and Moussaoudi decided to look for an investor. The resulting two million euros have enabled Eternal Sun to hire staff, move to a bigger location and update the product. “Every unit we build is slightly better. I would recommend that to everyone: do not wait until your product is fully developed. Always try to deliver something, even if it is just a prototype. Often that is already enough for the customer. And always discuss with customers what they need. They are what keeps you in business.”

Name: Stefan Roest (CEO)
Company: Eternal Sun (Technology)
Established in: 2011
Product: Solar simulator
Mission: Contribute towards renewable energy/sustainable products
Sales: Around a million euros in 2014
Eternal Sun will be at least ten times the size it is now.”