

The Leiden-Delft-Erasmus Universities Alliance (LDE)

Insights from a fact-finding mission on the role of the LDE Centres

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Introduction

I was asked by the LDE Steering Group to give advice on the extent to which the current LDE centres were ‘an *effective instrument to shape the future co-operation of the three universities*’. This was not to be a review of the performance of the centres as such although I did receive their individual self-evaluations prior to visits on 21st and 22nd March. On this visit I met some board members from all three universities and representatives of four contrasted centres.² In practice the programme for my visit focused on: the overall LDE strategy as reflected in the current work and evolution of the centres: how they organized collaboration between the universities and with civil society locally and globally: and plans to ensure the future sustainability of the both the individual centres and the overall initiative. I had limited opportunity to consider the institutional plans of all three universities (some of which are still under revision) and was not aware of the discussions that led to the adoption a centre model for underpinning the LDE Alliance or the basis for the selection of the centre-themes. But in summary the LDE Alliance with LDE-centres is a highly distinctive approach and should be allowed to continue before diverting the pump brimming resources to different modes of collaboration.

Context

The discussions were informed by the current LDE-strapline “Working together for science and society”, and the recent strategic papers for the new LDE-strategy, “the added value of LDL for Society”. The perspectives resonate with my own work on the civic university summarized below³:

- We live in an age where universities are challenged to demonstrate their public value. Citizens want to know: what is the university doing for us and for our city and region? So universities have to show, not only what they are good at in terms of scientific excellence but what they are good for in terms of addressing the challenges facing society locally and globally. Calling this the third mission is missing the point – civic engagement should be central to the mission of universities.
- This extends beyond contributions to the economy to embrace the public good and the well-being of society. Indeed the emphasis on the private value of higher education in

¹ A brief biography is at Appendix 1

² A programme for the visit is attached as Appendix 2

³ For a fuller discussion, see John Goddard et.al. (2016) The Civic University: The Policy and Leadership Challenges

the UK and elsewhere has arguably been at the expense of the contribution of universities to civil society at large.

- Local and regional engagement and the global outlook of a university can be mutually compatible since most grand challenges facing society such as sustainability are global and local. The city can be a living laboratory for testing new ways of working between universities, business government and civil society in so called 'quadruple helix' partnerships where citizens can be involved in the co-creation of knowledge.
- Handling this way of working requires specific skills from academics and professional staff as well as from local and regional authorities that co-operate with the university. The adoption of principles of hierarchical new public management in universities with a heavy emphasis on key performance indicators and academic/support staff specialization can be inimical to the development of multidisciplinary working and the careers of 'blended professionals' who can facilitate working with society by understanding the language of different organizations.

The LDE Strategy

- The plans, actions and intentions of the LDE-centres and the people involved with them resonate with much of the above narrative. They connect actively and entrepreneurially with relevant societal challenges and stakeholders, they are at the forefront of place-based innovation and work with public authorities, business and the community. However the host universities need to make clear in their individual strategies their commitment to the public good and the LDE Steering Group needs to benchmark the portfolio of centres and their work against the SDG's and their regional manifestation
- Having said this I recognize that the centres are not the whole of LDE-co-operation, which for example also includes the Medical-Delta programme and the earlier science-technology co-operation.
- In the case of the centres as a group a clear narrative from the LDE-perspective that ties all of this activity together is lacking .
- It is not clear how the LDE centre goals taken together connect with the other LDE-activities and, more importantly, the strategies and policies of the different universities. Is, f.i., the earlier science-technology co-operation also about civic engagement and grand challenges which manifest themselves in the region?
- To what extent can the LDE centres play a role in shaping the strategies of the individual institutions such that principles of civic engagement become embedded in the policies and practices of all three universities? If it is indeed a strategic alliance, it should also have an important role in the separate strategies.
- In a particular city and region like Rotterdam and South Holland with several universities the challenges and opportunities may point to the need to mobilise the resources of the whole institutions, not just the centres.
- So, the LDE-alliance still seems like a loosely coupled collection of enterprises with some quite different themes such as heritage and frugal innovation. This is not surprising. It is an initial phase of a bottom up co-operation between universities with diverse histories ,cultures and governance traditions. Each of the centres is at a different stage in its development. Combining this diversity with civic engagement makes the co-operation quite unique but difficult as well.

Moving ahead: sharing the message

- Investing in good communication/journalism to construct a narrative for an overall LDE 'prospectus' is urgently needed. The directors need to underpin this by "walk the walk" and "talk the talk" activity and using social media to support the work of not just individual centres but the collective endeavor.
- The national and international profile of the LDE endeavor could be raised by independent research into the unique nature of this inter-university co-operation, for example attracting a PhD or post-doc researcher to study and evaluate it as an example of (international) good practices. The LDE could also host a national and international conferences around the theme of inter-university collaboration in addressing societal challenges. Through such actions the LDE could establish itself as a global knowledge hub on place based university co-operation. And within the Netherlands LDE could be actively setting the national policy agenda around the public value of universities to their communities

Moving ahead: operational issues

- There is a lot of room for the centres to work more together, to learn from each other, discover mutual values and modus operandi like managing complex stakeholder relationships, approaches to citizen science, pitching together for projects (Local, national, international) and sharing facilities. Currently the managers/directors of the centres meet twice a year and mainly discuss practical matters. In the next phase, this should be more frequent, strategic and also involve the academic directors.
- There may be possible economies of scale by developing the central LDE organization. Most management tasks are undertaken by the individual centres themselves who often do not have the critical mass to support specialist functions/activities, for example staff recruitment, procurement of goods and services, IT/communication, setting up educational programmes and bidding for projects.
- A particular operational challenge that will need to be addressed is the different lines of accountability to senior management and different operational procedures (e.g. accounting and finance, HR) in each university. Currently, work-arounds have to be found and this can slow down projects and discourage entrepreneurial activity.
- It is clear that the success of the centres is highly dependent on the leadership skills of the executive directors in spanning the boundary between disciplines and with the world beyond the academy. The LDE needs to invest in developing these skills and to take care of the careers of the individuals concerned.

Sustaining the LDE centres programme

- In the light of the above observations the LDE Steering Group needs to reflect on the sustainability of the LDE centres and the organizational design of the programme which up until now seems to have evolved incrementally on a case by case basis.
- One model would be to create an LDE Hub able to operate between the universities with its own director, support staff and recruit academic directors to the centres (The latter has happened on an ad hoc basis in the case of some centres but not as part of an overall

LDE organizational development plan). This could initially be centrally funded by the universities with a plan to move to a model under which the centres contribute to support services based on an overhead on earned income.

- In this model, the centres would need enough autonomy to innovate and fly whilst at the same time contributing to the strategic objective of being a spearhead for the collaborative civic engagement of the three universities and potentially acting as change agents in each university.
- Merging the centres into one of the faculties in one of the universities would undermine the logic of an inter-university LDE Alliance. The alternative of making some or all of them completely financially independent seems a risky scenario at this stage.
- Another strategic question would be how to use the LDE-funds in the next phase of the strategy. I would advise consolidating existing successful initiatives and stimulate new ones by a combination of top down prioritization of key areas based on analysis of complementary academic strengths between institution and societal challenges followed by an open call for new proposal
- Any scenario would require the centres to generate new business plans for sustainability. Some of the centres have been very successful in acquiring research funding and establishing teaching, but they should be able to generate income from the latter.
- Surplus generating consultancy activities and continuous professional development or lifelong learning is largely missing from the centres. This could not only generate income, but also help in delivering research impact. A balanced portfolio combining short-term, consultancy based activities, medium term policy design and long term research and education should be the target. Shared central support for establishing this activity is required.
- Sharing or combining entrepreneurial-activities for students, for example based on the centre-themes, could also be a way to involve students and enhance societal impact.

Concluding remarks

- The LDE Alliance is a globally distinctive and pioneering initiative in many respects. It together researchers from different disciplines and from different institutions in the same region. It supports the sharing of teaching across the institutions in the prioritized areas. Above all it ensures that the shared work is undertaken in partnership with civil society, exhibiting many features of the civic university model which is gaining ground around the world not least in the Netherland where the Government has launched support for 'City Deals' linking universities and municipalities.
- Pioneering inevitably means taking risks and adjusting the way the endeavor is organized based on insights from outside the partnership. Hopefully the visit and this short report will help in this regard.

Acknowledgements

This report draws heavily on notes of the visit taken by Ronald van den Bos. Nevertheless the report is the responsibility of the author.

Appendix 1

Professor John Goddard OBE

John founded and led Newcastle University's Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) from 1977 to 1998. During this period it was designated as a 'centre of excellence' by the UK Economic and Social Science Research Council. (CURDS celebrated its 40th Anniversary in 2017). He translated his academic insights into the role of universities in city and regional development based on his research in CURDS into practise when appointed Deputy Vice Chancellor with special responsibility for the University's city and regional engagement.

Post retirement in 2008 John returned to CURDS to translate his experience in institutional management into academic outputs, policy guidance for individual universities, local and national governments and international bodies such as OECD and the European Commission. He was appointed a NESTA Fellow where he wrote a 'provocation' entitled 'Re-inventing the Civic University' and co-authored a book with Paul Vallance on The University and the City that looks into the university from outside. He has recently co-edited an international comparative study with Professor Ellen Hazelkorn The Civic University: the Policy and Leadership Challenges that takes an inside out view. Building on that work he has been appointed Vice Chair of an independent UK Commission on the Civic University sponsored by a charitable foundation.

John has led reviews of universities and regional engagement for the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council and acted as academic leader of the OECD programme on universities and city and regional development published as Higher Education and Regions: Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged. He has produced a Guide for the European Commission on Connecting Universities to Regional Growth. He is a member of the Mirror Group advising the Commission's Smart Specialisation Platform, and was on the Advisory Group on Widening Participation in Horizon 2020 and the Advisory Group on Science With and For Society and been a co-investigator in an FP7 Research Programme on Smart Specialisation led by Professor Kevin Morgan at Cardiff University. In 2015 he was elected a Fellow of the Academia Europaea.

Appendix 2

List of participants in the discussions

Board members:

Professor Carel Stolker, President/rector magnificus Leiden University
Professor Tim van der Hagen, President/rector magnificus Delft University
Kristel Baele MSC, President Erasmus University
Professor Huib Pols, Rector Magnificus Erasmus University Rotterdam
Professor Rutger Engels, Rector Magnificus Erasmus University Rotterdam from 15/06/2018 onwards

Deans:

Professor Victor Bekkers, Dean of the Erasmus School of Social en Behavioural Science
Professor Frank van der Duijnen Schouten, Dean of the Erasmus Faculty of Philosophy

Centres and affiliates:

LDE-Centre for Global Heritage and Development: Professor Jan Kolen, academic director
LDE-Centre for Frugal Innovation in Africa: Professor Peter Knorringa
LDE-Centre for Sustainability and Inclusive City Hub: Gertjan de Werk, associate director CfS,
Professor Ellen van Bueren, Scientific Board CfS, Tjerk Wobbles, coordinator Inclusive City Hub, Eva van Baren, knowledge broker CfS
LDE-Centre for Bold Cities: professor Marjolein Das, dr Alexander Koutamanis, dr Jiska Engelbert, dr Jay Lee

Leiden – Delft – Erasmus support:

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