

## Communicating across cultures

# The challenges of diversity

By 2014, the UT aims to recruit approximately 35% of master students from abroad, nearly tripling the international student population from 140 to 400 according to Route '14 Strategic Vision 2009-2011. While this goal promises an influx of diversity and talent, it also poses challenges.

TEXT: CATHERINE ANN LOMBARD | PHOTO'S GIJS VAN OUWERKERK >

Imagine a UT supervisor and international student meeting to discuss a project. While the supervisor reviews the proposal, the student nods in agreement and smiles. But in reality, she doesn't understand a word the supervisor is saying. She isn't used to hearing English spoken so quickly and in a foreign accent. In her country, where professors are never questioned, she is afraid to interrupt and ask the supervisor to speak more slowly. The meeting ends with everyone smiling in agreement, but nothing has actually been communicated.

This true story (the student asked to remain anonymous) illustrates that even when two people speak the same language, they don't automatically

communicate. In fact, intercultural communications are influenced by a number of sociological and psychological factors. 'Our cultural perspective is a programming of the mind which distinguishes us from other cultures,' said Dr. Erwin R. Seydel, Director of the Institute for Behavioral Research at the UT. 'This perspective then influences how we relate to each other and ultimately communicate. 'Power distance is one example of cultural programming,' he continued. 'It affects your body posture, how long you gaze at a person, and the language you use.' Power distance is the extent to which status equality is acceptable in society. While Dutch culture sees people on a more of an equal footing, other cultures, like those in Africa and Asia, have a different set of conventions when interact-

ing with someone who is considered of higher or lower status. In the scenario above, the student and supervisor had trouble communicating due to their different attitudes towards power distance.

Individualism-collectivism (I-C) is another cultural dimension that affects interpersonal communication. I-C refers to the extent that the needs of the group dominate over those of the individual. 'The Netherlands is considered a country high on the individualism index,' said Seydel. 'Communication is more verbal and direct, and competition rather than cooperation is valued. Countries like China and Japan are more collectivist, meaning communication is less explicit and harmony is valued over conflict.' How are these barriers to multicultural communication playing out at the UT? And what are some of the strategies being implemented to help guide us towards a future where we can better understand each other? To answer these questions, we first spoke with Dr. Paul van Dijk, who since 2007 has acted as director of the Graduate Programme and then as Head Research at the ITC. We then turned towards the UT and talked with Dr. Jelle G. Ferwerda, coördinator international affairs, who is heading the Acculturation project. Finally, we turned our focus towards three Dutch bachelor students who are traveling to South Korea and China this month.

### Years of experience at the ITC

ITC currently has 140 PhD students from 46 nations. 'These students must overcome tremendous barriers such as language and culture,' said Van Dijk. 'I'm amazed at the drive and resilience they have to create their success.'

Communicating across cultures can be challenging. 'It happens quite often,' admitted Van Dijk, 'that I think I am communicating. The students are saying "yes" or "no." But they don't really understand what I am saying.' To ensure that he and the student are effectively communicating, Van Dijk repeats and augments his questions and statements.

'The most difficult situation is when you have a very shy student who comes from a culture where the professor is not to be challenged. I can ask a question twenty different ways and I will only get a "yes" or "no."

'The most dramatic situation is when I must tell a PhD candidate that he or she does not live up to our academic standards and must discontinue.'



**'International students need a point-of-contact.'**



**Erwin Seydel: 'At the UT there are even cultural differences in communicating between technicians and social scientists.'**

reflected Van Dijk. 'This situation can be particularly difficult if the student comes from a collectivism point-of-view.'

'Sometimes their motivation is more external,' he explained. 'For example, their drive is coming from family expectations or financial needs. In that case, I try to emphasize that the PhD is not the most important thing in life. At the same time, I have to realize that, at this moment in time, it is the most important thing for the student sitting in front of me. My job is to try and put all of this into a context the student can understand and possibly accept.'

### Buddies, Videos and Home Day

Since 2009, the UT has developed an Acculturation project as part of the Route-14 plan for internationalization. The project aims to help international students more easily adjust to life in the Netherlands, both scholastically and personally. Acculturation refers to the process when groups of people from different cultures exchange cultural aspects with each other but remain distinct—clearly something that can only happen with multicultural communication.

'We are now developing a programme to facilitate mutual adjustment,' said Ferwerda. 'We have pre-departure videos informing incoming students on how education at the UT is organized and the differences international students may encounter. In addition, we are creating a cross-cultural module for Dutch and international students. We hope to build awareness around cultural rules and how they can affect the way you study and live.'

Student buddies for international students are

also being organized for the first months after their arrival. In the near future, UT staff will participate in an 'Internationalization at Home Day.' And the Acculturation Work Group plans visits to the various faculties. In addition, there is an International Facebook page with more than 1200 members.

International students typically face difficulties adjusting to and understanding the assessment process. Others struggle with limited contact hours with professors and a more independent learning style. The Acculturation project also aims at providing Dutch professors and lecturers with an international perspective on classroom practices. 'For example, we have known professors who asks masters students before a lecture, "Is there anyone who doesn't speak Dutch?" and then proceed to lecture in Dutch,' said Menno Kramer from the International Officer. 'They are simply not aware at how uncomfortable this might be for a Mexican or Chinese student to raise his hand and seemingly force the professor to speak English.'

To bring more cultural awareness into the classroom, the Acculturation project is currently visiting faculties in close collaboration with their Faculty International Coordinators. 'The aim of these visits is to hear the voice of staff involved on a day-to-day basis with international students,' said Ferwerda. 'We have to be careful to look at both sides of the story. In the end, we hope to develop information that can support students and staff.'

From a different perspective, on 12 November, 26 bachelor students and three professors leave for China and South Korea as part of a research project focused on strategy for growth. Called the

'Gloriental Study Tour,' the UT students plan to visit and conduct interviews at twenty companies in Seoul, Shanghai and Chongqing. How are they being prepared to communicate across cultures? We turned to three of the student organizers of the trip: Daan van Leer, Chairman; Ellen Hamelers, Research Coordinator; and Marjon Pol, Foreign Affairs.

'Before our departure, we are arranging for guest speakers,' said Pol. 'Recently we invited Mr. Yoon, who comes from South Korea. He told us things like how to accept gifts with two hands.'

'We were able to practice asking him questions and seeing how he responds,' continued Hamelers. 'We could see the expressions on his face and his eyes wondering, at times, what's going on? Sometimes he would say, "Yes, yes." And then change the subject. 'If we are stuck, I have an application on my iPhone,' said Van Leer. 'All the Dutch phrases are there, and I can click and find the Chinese translation, both in writing and sound. For the trip, I even have "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met."'

### Awareness is Key

In the end, intercultural communication depends on our sensitivity to the differences we experience between cultures and the goodwill to accept those differences and work with them. 'We need to enhance our qualities to deal with cultural differences, mainly with regard to our cultural style in behaving,' said Seydel. 'How do we meet each other? That is the challenge for our future. As a technical university, we have the opportunity to show that cultural differences can actually provide a unique occasion to solve common problems.' |