# Validation of interdisciplinary and transnational modules in HE; lessons learned from the Ideate project

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## Abstract

The validation process necessary to run a module which, at a local level, crosses University departments and, at an international level, involves different Universities’ administrative and process requirements is fraught with difficulties. Different credit systems, validation processes, module descriptor requirements and assessment methods at national levels do not a provide the flexibility to be able to validate exactly the same module; there was a need to adapt descriptors to different cultures to comply with local requirements. Within Universities, it was evident that some organisational systems facilitate cross disciplinary working while others create barriers with financial systems which are localised to each Department. At Staffordshire University, if a department runs a module and students from a different department join it, funding does not follow the student to the teaching department. This is an example of an organisational barrier to running interdisciplinary modules which could exist in any institution and will depend upon the management culture at the time. Indeed, a new Vice Chancellor was recently appointed at Staffordshire University who wishes to encourage cross disciplinary working and the barriers are being addressed.

So what have we learned about validation of modules from the Ideate project? Despite organisational barriers which exist at a local level, it is possible to have successful interdisciplinary and transnational modules provided there is flexibility and the delivery team work closely together. If organisational systems are a barrier, then this needs to be addressed with higher management. We have witnessed the advantages, for students, of studying in an interdisciplinary and transnational environment and the evidence that the project has provided can now be used to support the claim for institutional change if it is needed.

**Keywords**: higher education, inter-disciplinary, pedagogy, innovative curricula, entrepreneurial education

# Introduction

The IDEATE project began in October 2013 with 4 EU partners [1], and concluded on 30th September 2016. It had the following aims:

1. **Train** academics and students to become engaged in developing **entrepreneurial** behaviours,
2. **Develop** university curricula that facilitates inter-disciplinary study,
3. **Deliver** an inter-disciplinary, trans-national intensive learning residential where students of different disciplines operate as scientific-cum-creative teams, responding to a task set by a real-life employer
4. **Evaluate** the model and refine for future use
5. **Disseminate** good practice in interdisciplinary, entrepreneurial education
6. Provide a **legacy** of materials and resources for exploitation of lesson learnt for future implementation of interdisciplinary, entrepreneurial education

The target audience for the IDEATE project were:

1. **Students** – raising awareness, developing entrepreneurial behaviours, increasing employability
2. **Academic practitioners** – how to deliver interdisciplinary, entrepreneurial education with innovative teaching models
3. **Academic policy makers** – how infrastructure and policies can facilitate this new style of learning
4. **Employers** – how to engage with HEIs in synergistic collaborations leading to innovation of products and services.

(Borup et al, 2015)

This paper is written at the end of the IDEATE project, after four student mobilities involving 32 students from 4 Universities. The students were from varying study programmes including Law, ICT, Psychology, Biology, Creative Arts and Bio-medicine. The paper builds on an interim paper (Borup et al, 2015) which reflected on the validation process, the selection of students, the development of a common syllabus and common assessment, as well as the acceptance of the module as part of the learning plan of each student. The paper will discuss the legacy of the project and is written mainly from the perspective of the Staffordshire University experience.

# Research Questions

Borup et al (2015) wrote the interim paper for the Ideate project which tried to answer the following research questions:

* What can a comparison of the validation process at the 4 Universities reveal about the development of inter-disciplinary /trans-national curricula?
* Are there any barriers or enabling factors which influence the university wide uptake of inter-disciplinary / trans-national curricula?
* Are there any barriers or enabling factors which influence the use of an intensive learning/project based approach to inter-disciplinary / trans-national curricula?

The summary presented by Borup et al (2015) in response to these questions were as follows:

* *For EU universities to work more effectively on common modules there should be first a more thorough adherence to the ECTS system [5] especially in the UK where the UK credit system is still the norm. ECTS helps to make learning more student-centred. It is a central tool in the* [*Bologna Process*](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en.htm)*[6] which aims to make national systems more compatible.*
* *The ‘minimum size’ of modules could also be standardised, as there proved to be no common value either in ECTS or UK credits. The UK system of modules of 30 credits also made the inclusion of a smaller optional module problematic.*
* *Validation processes and documentation could be made more standard, as this would then enable a single instance of a module to be acceptable (with translation) across Universities. Common ‘life cycles’ of module validity would also help as this would prevent re-validation requirements after different lengths of time.*
* *Award structures should ideally contain sufficient flexibility for students to exercise a degree of choice – This proved possible in 3 of the 4 Universities, but the UK Faculty operated compulsory module structure with no flexibility for cross faculty or option modules.*
* *If trans-national learning is to be feasible, semester dates should allow a degree of synchronisation to facilitate trans-national mobilities.*
* *Where justified, teaching hours on modules should accommodate mobilities – this would in turn need to be reflected in teaching workloads.*
* *UK faculty processes need to accommodate inter-disciplinary working – currently this raises issues over aspects such as tuition fees, module ‘ownership’, teaching allocation and assessment boards.*

# Further Reflection on barriers and facilitators to transnational and transdisciplinary working

## Credit Transfer System

In the absence of Bologna version 2, we need to work within the ECTS and CATS credit system for transnational work across UK and Europe. It is widely recognised that ECTS credits are weighted half of CATS credits (e.g. 30 CATS in UK would be 15 ECTS in Europe), but with half the number of ECTS being required in Europe for the equivalent of UK courses. This makes mapping fairly easy, however, 2 CAT credit is equal to 20 notional hours of study whereas 1 ECT is equivalent to 25 – 30 hours of study making it very difficult to map hours of study. It could be argued that hours of study should be a common measure in all countries to allow flexibility worldwide. Countries outside the EU use other systems, e.g. the United States uses a system of US credit hours (Foreigncredits.com, 2012) which can be roughly mapped to other systems.

It is clear that when developing a transnational module, there needs to be flexibility to accommodate any national system, given the barriers which are created with the current credit accumulation systems worldwide.

## Standardisation of credits per module

While standardisation of all modules to 30 CATS credits or 15 ECTS would make validation of modules across different HEIs more achievable, there needs to be flexibility for HEIs to be able to define their own standards and for those standards to be interpreted in relation to the subject being taught. At Staffordshire University standard module size was increased from 15 to 30. One of the reasons for this was to reduce the administrative burden (fewer modules equates to fewer marks to be recorded). There is now a move toward splitting 30 credits down into 3 x 10 credit modulettes in some disciplines, but only one module descriptor would be required; learning outcomes are assessed as a whole, as is the overall module grade, thus allowing some borderline students to pass. This will assist flexibility within the Faculties but will not facilitate collaboration with overseas partners.

Staffordshire University only allows, when defining structure of Awards/courses, a few modules at each level/year to be split down as 15 credit modules and this proved to be an issue with the initial validation. Award Leaders were unwilling to use one of the 15 credit modules for Entrepreneurship; they considered their discipline to be more important. This isn’t surprising as Staffordshire University has a Staffordshire Graduate initiative, where every award has to specify where entrepreneurship, enterprise and employability have to be delivered and assessed in core modules. The Ideate module was seen by some Award Leaders as covering the same material twice. Those who were keen to get involved could see the advantages for their students of being given the opportunity to work with those of other disciplines and from other countries, with the added bonus of the cultural experience abroad. Some Staffordshire University students took the module in addition to their full Award diet of modules to avoid complications in calculating their final Award grade.

## Recruitment of students

There were several barriers which became apparent when trying to recruit students for the Ideate mobilities. The first one is mentioned in the previous paragraph and relates to the enthusiasm of the Award Leader, however, one of the main barriers at Staffordshire University was that students did not want to leave their ‘comfort zone’. This was evident in activities which are organised for them, for example there is little uptake for participation in trips to organisations/museums related to their studies.

The recruitment of students was also a problem for other partners. Being available as a final year option, students saw it as a risk as the module was unfamiliar and they had a final year project/dissertation to complete. Not enough consideration was given to the students’ perspective when deciding the appropriate level to offer a mobility module; you can create wonderful opportunities, but if students perceive it to jeopardise their goal, there will be little uptake.

## The Validation Process

Writing the module descriptors involved some alignment of terms, but did not create problems. The processes across partners were, however, very different as described by Borup (2015). The lead time needed to get approval to run a transnational module needs to consider the most bureaucratic HEI and, in the case of Ideate, this was Staffordshire University.

## Assessment

Initial ideas regarding assessment proved to be very difficult to implement as it focused on marking an individual’s contribution within a group. Presentations didn’t necessarily require all members of the group to talk, so how could the non-contributing members be assessed? After the first mobility the method of assessment was changed. This required an amendment to the module descriptor to be approved at Staffordshire University but not at other institutions.

The revised method of assessment focused mainly on relying upon the students’ individual reflections to confirm that learning outcomes had been met. Reflection is used more widely at Staffordshire University than partner HEIs, so advise was given to students (and lecturers) regarding what reflection is about and how to do it effectively. This method proved to be very effective and also provided feedback on the module delivery.

## Legacy of the Ideate Module

Given the success of the Ideate project which was evident in the student feedback (Borup, 2015), what future does the module have?

Ideate elements (mainly focusing around the pedagogic approach used) have been incorporated into the curriculum at all the partner institutions, but there has been limited success in ‘rolling out’ the actual module. Award structures, validation processes and time needed for Ideate champions to influence the systems are all factors which have resulted in the limited progress.

At Staffordshire University, the organisational structure is changing and the prospects of running a transdisciplinary module is now a real possibility. The old structure and the financial model had the effect of creating silos of activity; Schools and Faculties rarely worked together to provide courses. A module run by Computing would not accept students from other disciplines as they would not receive any funding. Each School had to balance its own budget. It would have been impossible to create an Ideate module. However, the structure is being changed to facilitate ‘connectivity’, in fact, being a ‘Connected University’ is part of the new vision. There have already been talks to provide an Entrepreneurship module which will be available across the University; 15 credits will use the Ideate model to develop entrepreneurial creativity with the option of taking a further 15 credit module focused on the business aspects of setting up their own company. The fixed core structure of the Awards might be a problem if there are not at least 15 credits of optionality and ‘winning Award Leaders over’ might still be an issue, therefore, the ‘roll out’ may take some time, but the opportunity is now real. It is not known whether the Staffordshire Graduate initiative will continue, but employability is a factor in league tables and therefore it is assumed that it will. The University executive might, in future, decide to require Award structures to make space for transdisciplinary modules to encourage ‘connectivity.’

Being able to run a transnational module relies upon adequate funding, which may prove more difficult for UK HEIs due to Brexit. Identifying and exploiting funding opportunities would be essential in order to collaborate and deliver mobilities across borders. Once the funding is established, there would still be issues of module validation, selecting students, etc. to address. Ideate could provide a model for this with relevant documentation regarding the project being available online at <http://ideate.me/>

# Conclusions and Recommendations

It is possible, given adequate funding, lead time, flexibility and enthusiastic individuals to negotiate a transnational module. Such modules are highly beneficial for students in terms of employability as evidenced by students who are now working or studying in foreign countries. However, funding needs to be sought at the early stages. It might be more cost efficient to work within single countries; this would not provide the same inter-cultural experience, but it would enrich the student experience.

Transdisciplinary modules are easier to establish, but this depends on the organisational structure of the relevant HEI. The situation at Staffordshire University is presented as an example of this factor. The philosophy of higher management is fundamental in either creating opportunities or barriers to transdisciplinary working. All systems need to be aligned to the philosophy, the funding system and the policies regarding validation and Award structure need to allow ‘connectivity’ to evolve if barriers are to be removed.

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[1] Education & Training for Entrepreneurship <http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/promoting-entrepreneurship/education-training-entrepreneurship/index_en.htm>

[2] Entrepreneurship Education: A Road To Success

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[3][www.ideate.me](http://www.ideate.me) Project reference number: 539696-LLP-1-2013-1-SI-ERASMUS-EQR

[4]IDEATE partners:

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| University of Nova Gorica | Slovenia |
| Staffordshire University | United Kingdom |
| University of Turku | Finland |
| Vilnius Business College | Lithuania |

[5] <http://ec.europa.eu/education/ects/ects_en.htm>

[6] <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en.htm>