

Blending Trade, Aid and Capacity Development

ITC, a Dutch knowledge institute with more than 60 years of experience in education, research and capacity development, merged with the University of Twente in 2010 to become the Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation. At the same time, Professor Tom Veldkamp commenced as the dean. He faced the challenges of responding to impending government budget cuts and guiding the organisation through the transition period. In January 2015, Veldkamp was reappointed for a further five years. *GIM International* caught up with the influential dean to learn how things have changed and what lies ahead for ITC.

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For those readers who are unfamiliar with the institute's activities, can you give us a brief overview of ITC and particularly the three pillars?

Today, the three pillars of ITC are research, education and capacity development in the specific domain of geoinformation science (GIScience) and Earth observation (EO). When ITC was founded in 1950, the main pillars were education and capacity development. Research has become more important over time as the level of education both demanded and provided has increased; MSc degrees have a research component, for example. Moreover, when we merged with the University of Twente in 2010, we also developed our own PhD programme which furthered our research interests. Overall, our research involvement and output has grown tremendously over the last decade, although education certainly remains the central pillar.

Since its establishment, ITC's right to exist has been linked with Dutch international development cooperation policy, yet public support for such policies has decreased recently. Will this decline jeopardise ITC's future?

I don't think community views are radically changing; rather they are going through a process of reorientation. The 'giving away for free' ideals that existed in the post-war era have been replaced by a more pragmatic if not realistic period. Countries and their citizens are more conscious of getting a return on investment. In this respect, ITC's

attitude is also changing. We are still building capacity at individual and organisational level, but we're also asking the question: what will the stakeholders, including ITC, get out of the investment? A future trading partner? Collaboration on projects? The interesting thing is that these questions are making the whole process more sustainable. Although we focused heavily on environmental and social improvement in the past, we never considered the issue of profit. We are now combining all three perspectives, and the resulting projects appear more economically viable, particularly after initial funding ends.

Regardless of the funding issue, ITC and its ongoing mission and work will remain hugely relevant in the next decade. We are unashamedly focused on developing countries; our areas of interest usually differ from most Dutch academic institutions. The grand challenges of developing countries are quite different to the local priority areas in The Netherlands. They impact upon millions of people, cut across international boundaries, and won't be solved overnight. We will continue to collaborate with our international partners to find spatial solutions to the challenges.

Now, as a faculty of a Dutch university, ITC will increasingly be treated like any other faculty under the Dutch university system, i.e. in terms of budgeting and performance indicators. How can ITC uphold its focus in this situation?

Yes, we are now a 'normal' Dutch academic faculty with all the associated requirements and expectations, but these help to keep us 'lean and mean'. I have no problem with that. Overall, the change actually makes things easier for ITC; we consider the world as our playing field. We are already set up to engage in global collaboration and international research-funding opportunities. We do many projects for the Asian Development Bank, African donors and the World Bank. These are money sources that our Dutch counterparts do not have access to. They tend to focus on the Dutch Science Foundation (NWO) and European grant channels. We focus on these too, but a whole range of additional funding sources are available thanks to ITC's emphasis on capacity development. We know our strengths and limits – and we carefully target where and how we apply our efforts.

Meanwhile, we've actually been quite successful at obtaining funds over the last four

or five years – much to our own surprise as anyone else's. There were numerous sceptics early on, particularly after our 20% budget cut in 2010, but through the recent successes in project acquisition we've already compensated for those losses. For us, this really helps to show how relevant ITC's work really is, both nationally and internationally. In fact, it's attracting quite a lot of attention within The Netherlands, particularly within the University of Twente. We're seeing the university begin to adopt more of our policy stances, rather than vice versa –

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particularly with regards to internationalisation. Indeed, the new president of the University Board sees ITC as a shining example for the rest of the university in that area.

ITC is increasingly publishing in highly recognised journals but on a global level the amount of scientific output continues to grow rapidly. How can ITC's research remain distinguishable from the thousands of other papers and articles, whilst also being accessible for the developing world?

ITC's policy is that all academic data and publications should be made available to everyone. We already have specific agreements with certain journals. For example, we still hold the editorship of the former ITC in-house journal, the International Journal of Applied Earth Observation and Geoinformation, and through this we maintain an agreement that a certain number of copies must be disseminated to universities around the globe. We're also part of the efforts to stimulate more open-access publishing. New deals are being struck between Dutch knowledge institutions and the large international publishers. More openness and availability is being demanded by academia. Some of the publishers are already on board, but others are still far from happy as it impacts upon their bottom line. In the end, we feel that they have to change; if all scientists decided not to publish anymore – and this is the ultimatum – it would be the end of the line for those publishers. We should always bear in mind that it is actually the public who pay for much of the work which is published in these prestigious journals.

Much ITC research takes place in the developing world, especially in Africa. There

are so many Western universities present there that one sometimes feels as if Africa is a scientific colony, where Western scientists observe and browse to their hearts' content. Harvard historian Niall Ferguson was said to be embarrassed that the discussion about Africa's future was dominated by white non-African men (note: preface in Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid*, 2009). What can ITC do to encourage African universities and scientists to take the lead? Or, put simply, when will Africa being sending students with

questionnaires to remote Dutch communities?

Well, I once had a Columbian student who did some questionnaires here in The Netherlands – and quite a few other ITC alumni have gone down that path with their MSc and PhD work, so perhaps it's already happening! On a more serious note, we need to give our counterparts a voice and empower them. Our training is intended to do that. We aim to help our students find that voice – to enable them to speak up and form their own views and opinions – so that they can participate in, if not lead, scientific and political debates back home. This does not always happen – particularly in some parts of the world where cultural norms make it difficult to participate in such public debates, but it's something we don't shy away from and something we strive to build in our students.

Strong engagement with our alumni is also important. In this domain, our network is extensive; we have over 20,000 alumni across 177 countries. We regularly support them by organising refresher courses, tailor-made training and other events to help them keep their technical prowess up to date. This also continually reminds them that, no matter which challenges they might be facing, they're part of something bigger, something global, and that friends and colleagues are always close by.

In her speech at the opening of ITC's academic year the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation called for worldwide attention to private and communal land issues – a subject to which ITC is particularly able to contribute. Yet the number of students on the land administration course has not really



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▲ Professor Tom Veldkamp during the interview with Rohan Bennett.

increased over the past decade. What is ITC doing to make its educational opportunities and curricula known to prospective students worldwide?

Whilst land is obviously central to the Ministry's key areas of interest, for example food security and water security, it is not mentioned explicitly in policies so therefore we do not get any special treatment with regards to the provision of scholarships and suchlike. Nevertheless, our student numbers have remained rather steady. We have a strong history in land tenure and its administration and will continue to explore options for growing the course. The ongoing collaboration with Kadaster International, through the shared School for Land Administration Studies, will continue to be a key element in these developments. Together we have a lot to offer and this has been recognised in many countries, particularly -in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Traditionally ITC's students have been mid-career professionals. Given the changes already discussed, will that demographic remain the focus or is ITC also looking to attract younger students without professional experience, straight out

of BSc programmes?

We are currently serving both, but a gradual shift towards younger student profiles is already underway. That said, as long as the demand from mid-career professionals remains, we will continue to serve that market segment. We envisage that shorter tailored courses will gain in popularity for the more mature groups; spending a full 18 months away from one's employer is becoming more difficult. A targeted three- to nine-week course might be more useful since it reduces the burden on families and employers alike.

As required by Dutch law, ITC's research and educational programmes have recently been reviewed and accredited. Such accreditations

are about guaranteeing staff, curricula and scientific quality. How do students benefit from this certified high level?

The accreditation process is about formalising the seal of quality. It provides another source of information for prospective students about the nature and value of our courses, supervision and so on. This applies both for MSc and PhD students. The accreditation provides a guarantee that we delivering up-to-date information and excellent standards, and that students are getting what they expect. We were quite happy with the recent positive accreditation results. All our research groups received 4s and 5s for all criteria (on a scale of 1 to 5), which reaffirms that we have a high – or even world-leading – international standing.

Observers say the digital divide between the rich and poor countries is growing every day. Does ITC also see evidence of this in its domain? And does it have a special policy or approach to bridge that divide? If so, how will the developing world benefit from it?

No doubt there is a digital divide, but the mobile phone revolution is a real equaliser in terms of access to digital telephony and digital data. We are seeing the impact across much of our work – be it in relation to water access or the creation of community maps. It enables a new way of creating, collecting, manipulating and disseminating spatial data – and much of the community already has access to the tool. At ITC and the University of Twente, we have a special focus on entrepreneurship, and we feel this can also accelerate the closing of the gap. Small businesses drive much innovation and development, and we are working to support the further development of our students in that regard. ◀

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Tom Veldkamp

Professor Tom Veldkamp is dean of the Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation (ITC) at the University of Twente, The Netherlands. He holds MSc and PhD degrees from Wageningen University in tropical soil science and environmental science respectively. Following these achievements he worked for the Dutch Geological Survey before returning to Wageningen University. He was appointed as professor and chair of land dynamics in 2002. He moved to the University of Twente at the end of 2009 and maintains a research line focused on land use science.