They do not only find each other in terms of age, key characteristics and ambitions. There is more that binds the twelve ECIU universities. They inspire each other and learn from each other. And that leads to innovations. A good example is the Aalborg teaching model for problem based learning (PBL).

The teaching method was developed at Aalborg University (AAU) at the Centre for Problem Based Learning in Engineering Science and Sustainability. ‘This centre has been founded under the auspices of UNESCO and was formally launched in May 2014,’ says Inger Askehave, prorector of Aalborg University. ‘However, it is an integral part of our history to innovate education. AAU was established in 1974 and already at that time faculties wanted an alternative approach to education.’

A revolution
The university introduced new formats with Problem and project-based learning at the centre, curricula design with focus on project-organised group work and supervision, and physical alterations with designated areas for project work. Askehave: ‘It was a revolution at the time; but to Aalborg University it has always been natural to work along these rather innovative lines.’

The Danish university believes that the PBL-approach still has a lot to offer. ‘We are constantly trying to further develop the teaching method. At this stage we are especially concerned about the ways how we may introduce and exploit digital learning methods to further strengthen the academic and collaborative aspects of PBL.

Many universities – besides ECIU-member-universities – have been inspired by Aalborg’s approach to learning and teaching. ‘I am proud that so many universities look at AAU for educational innovation. A whole team of dedicated and skilled teachers and researchers travels around the world to spread the word about the Aalborg PBL model.’

‘Faculties wanted an alternative approach to education’
The University of Twente (UT) was one of the universities that found new inspiration in Aalborg. In 2014, the ‘Twente Educational Model’ (Twents Onderwijs Model or TOM) was introduced there. This form of education consists entirely of project-based learning.

'We had to make a major change to adopt this new educational method as our central principle,’ says Tom Mulder, advisor strategy and policy at the UT. ‘Aalborg University has grown up with project-based learning, so it is part of their DNA. That is not the case for us. Although we definitely had experience with project-based learning, it was quite a radical move to structure all our education around projects.’

Their Danish colleagues continue to offer regular lectures as well, Mulder knows. ‘They thought we were brave to make this choice.’ The road was not entirely free of obstacles. ‘After the implementation, we had to sort out the usual difficulties with regards to testing and scoring.’

Other universities are interested as well, Mulder notes. He gives a talk about TOM at least once a week. ‘There is a continuous stream of interested parties. They mostly want to know how we handled the transition from regular education to project-based learning and what we encountered along. We can definitely help our colleagues in that regard, just like Aalborg inspired us once upon a time.’

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‘The new KTU study model has been driven by the exponentially fast changes in society and market needs, by the contemporary expectations of our students, and it certainly meets the needs of the modern teaching and learning paradigm’, states Jurgita Siugzdiniene, Rector Ad Interim at Kaunas University of Technology.

‘We are yet on our way of implementing the new curriculum grounded on competence development, problem and project based learning. Aalborg University and the University of Twente are the role models for PBL and project based learning for us and we are grateful for all of the received consultations and recommendations. We are certainly learning from the best.’

Hamburg University of Technology started implementing early forms of project oriented learning, later project based learning among other with the help of the Aalborg model: Members of the university’s Center for Teaching and Learning (ZLL) went to Aalborg several times. Now – six years later – both forms of PBL alongside other didactical formats support the university’s vision of implementing curricula so as to provide a research-based learning experience to students.

Using PBL ensures that students become professionals who are able to acquire and apply knowledge and who can contribute new knowledge to their field of study, through curiosity and a critical attitude. The PBL-model teaches students the ability to find, critically assess, combine and use new information is an important skill in the twenty-first century. They know all the ins and outs of their field of study and can contribute to its development. They are also capable of venturing off the beaten path and applying their knowledge in a broader context, in collaboration with other disciplines and society.