

# Management of diversity and levels of achievement in professional football clubs

Maarten van Bottenburg and Jan Janssens

W.J.H. Mulier Institute – Centre for Research on Sports in Society

## Introduction

As a consequence of the processes of globalisation and commercialisation, professional teams and clubs from a variety of branches of sport have acquired an increasingly heterogeneous character. While teams were once primarily made up of players from one and the same country, the national origins of fellow team mates can today be extremely diverse. The degree of this diversification is particularly extreme in professional European football. Footballers from across the entire globe participate in the current European premier divisions.

This development has not emerged without its own problems. When purchasing players, boards of directors assess these players on the basis of their physical and technical abilities rather than their national origins, cultural backgrounds or adaptability. Consequently, the training staff are confronted with players who do not speak each other's languages or understand the other's cultures. The formation of sub-groups within the selection on the basis of national or ethnic backgrounds and intercultural miscommunication means that the trainers are faced with new contradictions and conflicts, which did not or hardly received any attention during their own professional training. The consequence of this development for the players is that many – often at a young age – come to work and live in another culture with a foreign language, within which – without family and friends around them – they are forced to become highly self-reliant.

The issue of whether these state of affairs have a negative bearing on the growth and performance of both the individual players and the team as a whole has hardly been addressed within the world of football, despite the fact that it has been convincingly demonstrated that groups of a homogeneous nature perform far better (Williams & O'Reilly 1998) and that the improvement of performances by heterogeneous groups demands that more time and attention be devoted to the bridging of differences, the improvement of communication and the prevention of mutual lack of understanding (Doherty & Chelladurai 1999).

One Dutch football team provides an exception to this rule of a lack of interest in such problems. The training staff of this club believe that performance is not simply restricted to the physical and technical qualities of the players. To investigate this and make improvements, the club has sought the assistance of the W.J.H. Mulier Institute. This partnership has resulted in research into the impact of multicultural groups of players on their team performance and the development of a strategy whereby the unity and cohesion of heterogeneous groups may be advanced.

In our presentation we shall provide an account of this research: is there a relationship between the diversity of the selection and the performance of professional football organisations at the highest level of the Dutch football competition (premier division)? Further to this, we will demonstrate how the improvement of performance can be striven for by more investment in the management of diversity and the way in which training staff and directorates of professional football organisations can profit from more collaboration with centres of education and research.

## Method

In order to explore the relationship between diversity and performance, data was gathered on the national origins of players and trainers, the overall ranking, total of points, number of spectators, duration of trainers' contracts, number of changes of trainers and size of budget for all professional Dutch football clubs, which ended up in the premier division between 1989 and 2004. On the basis of the data on the national origins of the players, measures for the diversity, ethnicity and chance for miscommunication and misunderstanding (M&M) were calculated for each club. The diversity of the team was determined in two ways: the (absolute) number of nationalities in the team and the number of nationalities in the team divided by the number of players. A weighing factor was used in the measure for ethnicity for the distance of the national origins of players from the Dutch culture. Moreover, the M&M measure was calculated by calculating the number of possible pairs in the team whereby there is an increased chance for conflict or miscommunication to occur as a consequence of differences in nationality and ethnicity. These measures

were then related to the data on the overall ranking, total of points, number of spectators, duration of trainers' contracts and the number of changes in trainers. In this regard, the size of the budget of each of the premier division clubs was taken into account as far as possible.

### Results

In the duration of period studies, the three measured increased in all of the clubs, although the levels of diversity and M&M in most clubs has stagnated or even declined since the turn of the century. In many respects, it appears that the club that approached the Mulier Institute has taken a deviant (more extreme) position. During the entire period, the percentage of non-Dutch speaking players for this club increased more significantly than for rest of the premier division. Moreover, this increase also continued after 2000. This growth was mainly due to the increased recruitment of non-western players (from Africa, Asia and South and Central America). The percentage of non-native (immigrant) Dutch players lagged (far) behind the remaining premier division clubs. As a consequence, this team scores the highest among all of the clubs for the measure of ethnicity and, particularly during the second half of the 1990s, it has a far higher M&M factor than the other premier division clubs.

For all the teams together it appears that the degree of diversity only weakly correlates with the number of points scored (.20) and ranking (.26). The same applies to the correlation between ethnicity and total of points (.27) and ranking (.31). However, there is a positive relation between both measures and the number of spectators, but this is strongly influence by an external factor (the expansion and modernisation of stadiums). The size of the clubs' budgets seems to be strongly correlated to their diversity (.94) and ethnicity (.95).

For a large number of clubs, there appears to be a strong relationship between the M&M measure and the number of points scored. In general, this concerns an increase in the M&M measure together with a decrease in the total of points and vice versa. This correlation seems to be especially strong for the club that approached the Mulier Institute for assistance.

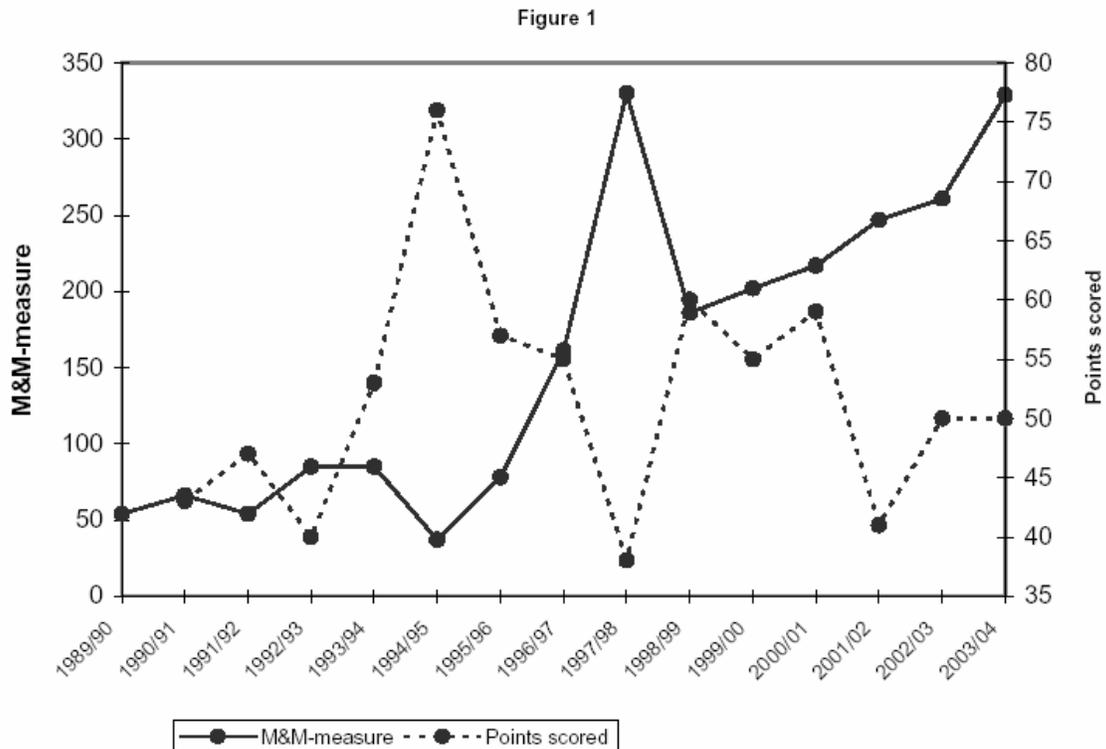
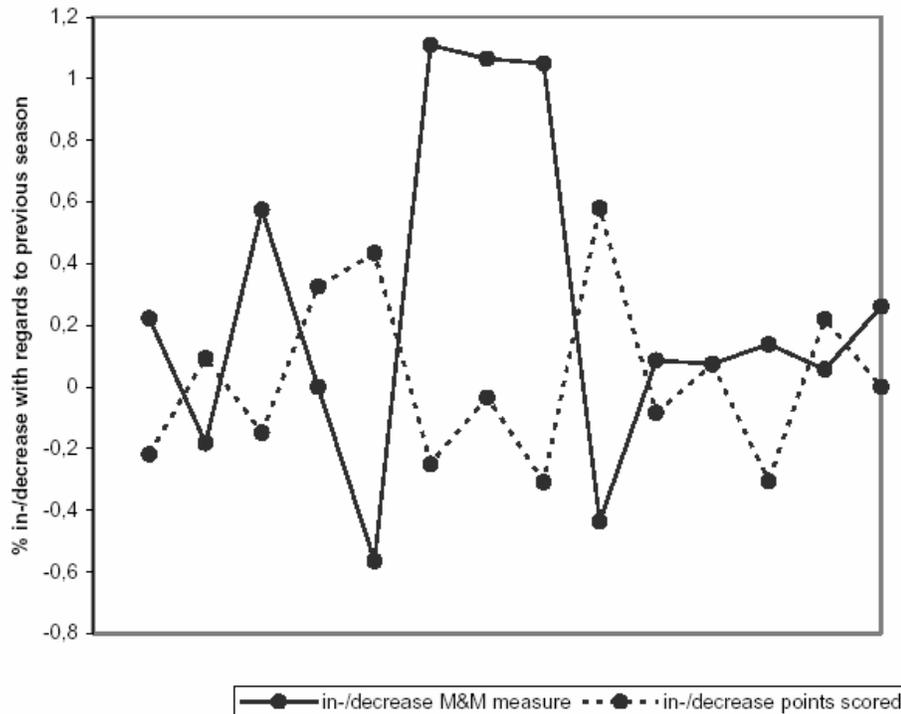


Figure 2



## Discussion

Professional football clubs spend millions on the purchase of new players and thereby create extremely culturally heterogeneous selections, yet they invest very little in diversity policymaking. Our research suggests that this is erroneous. Clubs, which have more players with differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds and are in the front ranks, increase the opportunities for miscommunication and lack of mutual understanding, thereby putting pressure on their performance. To tackle this adequately, a specific supplementary policy is desirable, which offers insight into the management of diversity amongst groups of players (Doherty & Chelladurai 1999; Siebers, Verweel & De Ruijter 2002). Most of the trainers and boards of directors lack this kind of insight. Collaboration between football clubs, training courses and research institutions could indeed precipitate a change in this situation.

## References

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## Contact co-ordinates author

Dr. Maarten van Bottenburg & Dr. Jan Janssens  
 W.J.H. Mulier Institute – Centre for Research on Sports in Society  
 P.O. Box 188, 5201 AD 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands  
 Tel +31 73 6126401; Fax +31 73 6126413  
[j.w.janssens@mulierinstituut.nl](mailto:j.w.janssens@mulierinstituut.nl); [m.vanbottenburg@mulierinstituut.nl](mailto:m.vanbottenburg@mulierinstituut.nl)  
[www.mulierinstituut.nl](http://www.mulierinstituut.nl)