

Intellectual Property

Our department contributes to innovative ideas of our community. As a student you have access to knowledge and ideas of other people in an inspiring environment. Independent of where you got your inspiration from, the department is formal owner of this intellectual property (IP). IP refers to the ownership of creations of the mind, the intellect. Outside of our department and especially in innovative business areas where competition is fierce, a monopoly on the right for exploitation of ideas is often a strong advantage for companies in order to stay ahead of the competition. IP may be established on technical inventions, trademarks, and design. Only governments may issue legal rights with which you can forbid others to make or sell the same inventive product or service, or to use the same trademark or design. Copyrights, on the other hand, automatically apply after creating an original piece of work and is valid worldwide. These works are in the area of art, literature, music, movies etc.

Technical inventions may be protected by means of a patent, which provides protection from imitation for a maximum of 20 years. A patent is usually limited to a couple of countries, based on a company's IP and marketing strategy. The scope of the invention is described in such a way that the competition will not get away with some slight changes to the invention. Sometimes these changes lead to very costly disputes between big companies, because protection of large markets is at stake. Think for example of the patent wars between Apple and Samsung a couple of years ago. Billions of fines were issued to both parties by US courts. Small companies also have IP issues, but these are often settled.

The protection of trademarks is also very important for most companies. Imagine you want to start a beverage company called Coca Cola. You would probably not sell a first bottle without being sued, even if you called your brand Koka Kola. Rule of thumb is that your brand may not confuse the public.

A design right offers protection of the form of your product. You will particularly benefit from this right if you are very dependent on the iconic shapes of your products.

Intellectual Property within your study

Your study gives you the opportunity to explore the possibilities of protecting your inventions and you may even start up your own company with these property rights (IPR). It may seem complicated in the beginning, but in the end it can be very rewarding. On the one hand you will become knowledgeable in the IPR area, which adds to your professional conduct and especially understanding of business processes. On the other hand, legal protection may really add value to your future products. Imagine; if a package of an innovative product states: patented (or even patent pending), would you just copy it or would you try to design around it?

Considering that we also work extensively with external clients, which are often big companies such as Philips, we expect you to respect the department's IPRs as well as that of our clients. In all cooperation with clients you need to be aware of who owns the ideas resulting from the cooperation. Sometimes a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) is necessary to prevent either party from disclosing the secret information in the public domain. It is very important to know that any publication of an invention (also in your showcase!) weakens the chance for the inventor, for our department and for our clients to acquire a valid patent protection. Moreover, a researcher usually takes care that a paper is the first publication of the research findings. It would be very unprofessional if you were to publish the results first in your showcase or in the Cursor.

No doubt you will invent many products and services. The next step is to investigate if your invention already exists and to consider various means of IP protection. Be aware that in many cases information may be secret and that you have a responsibility with respect to IP. Eventually, this will prepare you for working with innovative companies and adds value to your products and to your professional stature.