

CENTRALLY ORGANISED UNIVERSITY SCIENCE SHOPS: THE BENEFITS

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In January 2003, Flanders established 2 science shops in 2 different universities, with 1 central support unit. We discuss experiences and benefits from a mini-network.

1. ____The Flemish Science Shops____

Since January 2003, Flemish non-profit organizations can call on 2 science shops for their research questions: one at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and one at the Universiteit Antwerpen. These science shops were established with financial support of the Flemish government. The latter gave us 3 years time to determine the best possible integration of community based research into the Flemish universities. For this, a mini-network was established of 2 science shops and one central support unit. This unit is also organised by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Thus, together with the Netherlands and Romania, Belgium makes up the 3 countries having a science shop network.

____Comparison with the Dutch network of Science Shops, alike but different____

The Flemish science shops, though started up following the model of the Dutch science shops - and with extensive consultation of our Dutch colleagues - are in several aspects different from their Dutch counterparts.

a. A different start.

The development of the mini-network of two science shops in two different universities was not a bottom-up initiative. It was part of a larger, government-funded project 'Science & Society in Interaction'. The science shop part had as goal the determination of the proper conditions and the best format for a larger Flemish network.

b. Think big, act small.

With 2 science shops we are covering the whole Flemish region and the Flemish speaking part of Brussels. These 2 science shops are linked by a central support unit. It gives us a chance to act as a bigger network and to establish some common materials like a database, a look-and-feel, a central website,... ready to take on new science shops. This approach is different from the Dutch where first a big amount of science shops arose and then later on attempts were undertaken to bring them into a network.

c. Looking for a need.

Our project is a pilot project. It was implemented top-down and hence, required an investigation into the demand side. We therefore performed a survey among 5420 clubs and ngo's. We received 586 responses. Within that set, 44% from Flanders and 71% from the Brussels Region reported that they encountered societal questions and problems of the kind that could be interesting for science shop research. Those reporting problems were primarily environmental clubs, senior clubs, and specific patient organizations, and consequently, health, communication or cultural problems were dominant.

2. ____The structure of a (mini) network____

When we were processing the first cases, a who-does-what problem surfaced, linked to running two shops in two different university locations, with one central support unit. This was solved by a clear

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and strict task distribution among the three constituting components. Though some tasks moved from one component to another we now achieved a good functioning network. The central support unit is functioning as a central information-point for the organisations in Flanders and Brussels. It now can concentrate on the promotion actions to the specific target group and on collecting of community based research topics and problems. This way, the 2 science shops can focus on the problem-solving part through thesis-research or shorter scientific advises.

_____Tasks_____

Tasks of the Central Support Unit:

- Central information-point for science shops in Belgium
- Focussed promotion to non-profit organisations
- Global support for other Flemish science shops
- Database and Website management
- Redistribution community based research topics to regional science shops
- Horizontal and Vertical networking (communication with governments)

Tasks of the two Regional Counters:

- Reference point for students and researchers
- Reference point for clients
- Mediation from question to answer
- Local management of resolved cases.

_____Benefits of a mini-network_____

a) Marketing point off view:

1 information point for the target group (non-profit organisations) gives the possibility to work with 1 telephone number, 1 website, 1 e-mailaddress, 1 location and the possibility to create 1 look-and-feel.

b) Central administration

The creation of documents like the procedures (legal and academic) can centrally be organised. Interesting is that documents like the procedures or a central website and folder can easily be centralised and doesn't have to be re-invented for each science shop apart.

c) Maximum service with limited means

After some 22 months of working (including a start-up period of a few months, we have received 255 questions, of which 125 are still open at present (December 2004), 52 are running or under consideration, and 78 have been concluded. This has been performed with a staff of 3 members (1 per science shop and 1 for the support unit).

d) Networking

Using the Central Support Unit, we can speak as the national contact point. This is not only of interest in an international context but thus we also form one entity towards the National government.

3. _____Ambitions_____

After almost two years of activity, we remain convinced of the necessity of an extension of the Belgian network. To assure the continuity of the existing science shops, we argue for a model of regional university based science shops, supported by one Central Support Centre.