

BOTTLENECKS IN SCIENCE SHOP ACTIVITIES

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The implementation of the two Flemish science shops encountered various problems due to the characteristics of the Flemish higher education system, the structural organization of the university as well as society's culture. Using our pilot case we address some of the bottlenecks and the remedies we have applied and will continue to apply in the future.

Our pilot case is a request of a communication agency for a research into the press covering of migrant issues in Antwerp-based periodicals. During the execution of the research, we were confronted with several bottlenecks due to the difference in expectations of the client on the one hand, and the characteristics of Flemish higher education and the university's structure on the other hand. The problems concern feedback and involvement of the client during the research, the scientific jargon in the report, the press release, the academic calendar, ...

Bottlenecks and remedies

The strict academic calendar of the Flemish higher education system poses an important practical problem. The universities in Flanders are differently structured and, of more importance, the organization of the education (and research) is different. As a result, the system is quite rigid, leaving less room for a flexible response to societal demands. For example: university students start their Master thesis in September or October of their senior year and finish it at best in May or July. This means that when the Science Shop receives a new question in November a research project can start at best in September of the following year (if we can find a student and professor who are willing to do the research). As a result, most clients have to wait quite long before they get an answer to their question.

To make sure that subjects for Master theses are timely introduced by the clients, we have increased our communication about the rigidity of our Flemish educational system and in cooperation with our Central Support Unit we send out calls for new research questions on crucial times in the academic year: one in October and one in February. Clients are invited to present their new questions themselves at our thesis market to junior students. October and February are crucial months, because in those periods the juniors have to choose the topic of their Master thesis.

77% of the questions we receive at the Science Shops in Belgium concern social sciences, but only a few students graduate in sociology. This means that many of these 'social questions' remain unanswered.

To make sure that more questions can be answered, the science shops offer more services besides thesis research. For example: we also offer internships, research guidance, reports of tutorials and small research projects.

Most clients don't know the possibilities and limitations of student (thesis) research, leading to too high or wrong expectations. During the research the client can give feedback. The thesis director decides which contribution can or cannot be taken into account. In the case of the communication agency for example the publications that

were brought in by the client were not considered as academically useful, which led to a disagreement between thesis director and client.

During the intake discussion with the client, a lot of thesis research information will be provided to make clear what thesis research means and to avoid too high or wrong expectations. We also explicitly clarify the role and responsibilities of each of the actors. To the intake procedure we added an intake discussion with the thesis director to make sure he/she fully understands the needs of the client and the relationships between client, student, thesis director and science shop.

During the research process the student must keep in touch with the client to make sure that the latter remains satisfied and feels involved with the research. Communicating with the constituent is not something that many students do automatically. This was the case for the research for the communication agency, where the client felt left out by the student.

We have intensified our mediating activities to make sure that there is enough communication between student and client.

When writing a report of his or her thesis research, the student has to follow specific rules (concerning structure and jargon) that are made up by the faculty and the thesis director. These rules don't always meet the client's expectations.

In case the structure and the language of the thesis report does not satisfy the client, we offer the latter the possibility (against extra cost) to have it translated into a popular report. During the writing process we also offer the students a workshop where they can learn skills to achieve a more client friendly thesis.

The VUB has its own press office that sends out all the press releases, including the ones about science shop research. This implies that focus is only on the research and the results. The client hardly gets any attention in the press release. So the latter misses out on an opportunity to gain media attention. In the case of the community agency for instance there was disagreement between thesis director, science shop and client on the content and ownership of the press release.

We have introduced strict rules for the press release. Communication is set up between the various actors: student, thesis director and client. After agreement on the content part that relates to the thesis, the client releases the message.

Conclusion

The pilot case of the VUB science shop brought to our attention certain bottlenecks and problems that forced us to adjust and improve our procedure:

On the one hand, some of the bottlenecks, such as the strict academic calendar, the large amount of unanswered questions and the problems concerning content and ownership of the press release, are due to the rigidity of the Flemish higher education system and the university's structure. We remedied these problems by respectively specifying the content and timing of our communication, expanding our service package and introducing strict rules for press releases.

On the other hand, bottlenecks such as clients having too high or wrong expectations of thesis research are due to society's own culture. To avoid them in the future we intensified our thesis-research information during the intake discussion with the client and we added an intake discussion with the thesis director to make sure he or she fully understands the science shop procedure.