

Session 3.f. Research policy and Global networking in community research  
*Politique de recherche et stratégies des réseaux de recherche participative*

## **Structural embedding of Science Shops in a governmental science communication policy**

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**Since 2006, non-profit organizations can reach all 5 universities in Flanders with only one call in order to ask research support. Thanks to the support of the Flemish authorities a network of university based Science Shops in Flanders has been created, consisting of a central contact point, Wetenschapswinkel.be, and regional university based Science Shops: 1 at the Universiteit Antwerpen, 1 at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1 at the Universiteit Gent, 1 at the Universiteit Hasselt, 1 at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and 1 at the Katholieke Universiteit Brussel. So actually, Science Shops are now embedded in the policy of the Ministry of Science and in the policy of science communication of each institution of higher education in Flanders.**

In Belgium the term Science Shop or 'Wetenschapswinkel' is used. The regional Science Shops provide services that are university-related. In 90% of the cases non-profit organizations are helped out by senior students who have to write a master thesis as part of their education.

### **"Why" is this unique?**

#### **1. The model: central -regional**

Our model contains 1 central unit and 5 regional Science Shops.

The central unit is the main contact point for the non-profit organizations. It collects the community research questions and dispatches them to the regional shops.

The main benefit of working with a central unit is that with a minimum of expenses it can give a maximum service to the non-profit organizations throughout the region and assist the 'young' Science Shops in their tasks.

#### **2. The co-funding of the Flemish Government**

This network of 1 contact point and 5 regional Science Shops is for the major part (90%) financed by the Flemish Government.

## A short introduction in Belgian Science Shops:

Belgium, 1 country, but for many – political matters divided into 3 regions, namely Flanders (primarily Dutch-speaking citizens), Brussels (Dutch-speaking and French-speaking citizens) and the Walloon provinces (primarily French-speaking citizens). Overlapping on this, the country is divided into three ‘cultural’ communities (essentially language-based): a Flemish one, a French-speaking one, and a small German-speaking one. Education, and most of the research, is a policy-matter of the communities. Hence, Science Shops fall under the responsibility of the communities. Currently, Belgium only has a Science Shop network in Flanders and in Flemish part of Brussels. As such, our stakeholder is situated in the Flemish part of Belgium.

Before 2002 there were no Science Shops in Belgium (apart from a short period initiative at the university of Leuven in the eighties of the previous century). In 2002, thanks to the attention of the European Commission for the concept of Science Shops, awareness was created for community based research. Moreover, we were lucky that a member of Parliament urged the universities to bridge the gap between universities and the community through Science Shops. As a result, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the Universiteit Antwerpen introduced a common pilot project to find out what kind of science shop model would work in Flanders.

The Flemish government gave us 3 years time to determine the best possible integration of community based research into the Flemish universities. For this, a mini-network of 2 Science Shops (one in Brussels and one in Antwerp) and one central support unit was established. The Flemish twin network started on the 1st of January 2003. After 33 months, in 2005, we presented a final report on how to set up a science shop network in Flanders.

The ambition was to continue the work of the existing Science Shops and to create new Science Shops in the other Flemish universities.

## Dark clouds in the sky

However, in politics everything can change in a glimpse of time, and we were confronted with a change of Minister of Science Policy and changes in the Minister’s cabinet. And this new entourage was more sceptic about Science Shops.

For the continuation of the existing twin network and of its enlargement, we got ourselves confronted with three **obstacles**:

1. A new Minister of Science who’s sceptic about Science Shops
2. Scepticism within some other universities about the priority to finance Science Shops
3. And, in general, a less favourable time for Science Shops. There were a lot of closures in the Netherlands, and less direct attention of the European Commission for Science Shop activities.

We tried to convince the Minister of Science policy by building our case on 4 arguments :

1. In present society, Science Shops are necessary for the community
2. A Science Shop can integrate perfectly into the structure of a university
3. A Science Shop is “science communication”
4. The Science Shop and its international and regional position

### **A Science Shop is necessary for the community**

For the 1<sup>st</sup> argument we collected some relevant information such as:

a) Facts and figures through a need study. 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.

b) We emphasized the democratic, social and economic value of bringing the community closer to research, and research closer to the community:

- Science Shops help the researchers to show some interest in the topics that the community is interested in;
- Democratizing knowledge: emphasize that Science Shops help the community to obtain objective scientific answers or solutions to local problems or basic society-based problems;
- research-based answers to societal questions help the community with critical reflections;
- increase civic engagement in the agenda-setting of research topics (community as starting point for research) so they can have access to knowledge & research results that concerns them
- community can use the research results to position them in this new knowledge society

### **A Science Shop can integrate perfectly into the structure of a university**

In general, universities have three responsibilities related to governmental funding: research, education, societal services. Within the latter part of the mission we situated the services of Science Shops.

We can also point out that universities have a responsibility to share knowledge with society.

Finally, the integration into the structure of a university can happen with minimum expenses because there is a large potential of research.

For example we work with students. Master students have to write a masterwork anyway. So why not consider to do a research for an organization?

### **A science shop is "science communication"**

This was an important argument as it linked Science Shops to an essential aspect of the science policy of the government.

The policy plan includes among others an action plan "Science Information and Innovation". Within the policy of the Ministry much attention is given to the popularization of Science and Technology. For the implementation of this action plan the government has input from and collaboration with different partners. It is within that action plan that we situated the Science Shops.

## **We strengthened our case through our network position**

International position: Thanks to the LK-network we've put Belgium on the map as one national contact point.

Regional position: In Flanders 'Science Shop' was the first project in science communication where universities work together as a team. Next to the network of universities there is also a network with the community

### **The decision:**

After consideration of the arguments (and some lobbying from our part) the Ministry of Science Policy decided to implement the Science Shops into a bigger contract with the Flemish universities on Science Communication.

Since the 1st of January 2006 the network has expanded. Each university in Flanders has now its own regional science shop.

The Flemish government coupled the funding of the network of Science Shops to the realization of various other objectives related to 'science in society actions' and to science communication. These other objectives include contributions to the realization of the Lisbon objectives and enhanced science communication.

### **The contract:**

What was important for us is that we had a financing that covered several years (so that we didn't have to cope with a yearly uncertainty) and that we could stick to our central-regional model. For the government it was important that science shops are embedded in the governmental science communication policy.

### **This led to:**

**One contract  
between the Flemish government and higher education concerning the realization  
of a pole of expertise  
for the popularization of science, technique and technological innovation**

The contract between the universities and governments states that universities will engage in an improved communication of science with community.

This contract contains some requirements:

- every university and schools of higher education had to sign the contract (all-or-nothing approach),
- there had to be a uniform understanding about science information and science communication among the universities, the associated institutions and the government,
- there should be a uniform agreement about the main assignments of science communication
- every university had to create a 'pole of expertise'

This should now result in:

- a general mission statement on science communication
- a general 'work plan' (with a number of core tasks)
- a general funding scheme
- a general evaluation matrix with output-indicators (cf. the talk by IIs De Bal)

### **Why ask for financial support to the Government?**

.. and why wouldn't universities invest in Science Shops themselves?

- universities primarily invest in research and education
- government has a responsibility to support the 3rd mission of the university (societal service)

### **Advantage:**

The financial support guarantees the continuity of the service to the community, specifically as science communication and science shop activities are not-for-profit activities!

### **Disadvantage:**

- A big administrative workload: writing budget proposals, making reports, ...
- Keeping your financer satisfied: pressure on diversification for science shop activities from the human sciences towards more applied sciences. Pressure on the amount of science shop reports to ngo's.

### **Warning:**

The focus of your service determines the choice of your stakeholder. But this goes in two directions! The choice of the stakeholder also reflects upon the focus of your service.

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