SUSTAINABILITY FOR SCIENCE SHOPS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DEVELOPING POLICY AND STRATEGY

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Over the last 30 years, Science Shops across Europe have had to develop strategies to ensure sustainability. One of the main ways of achieving this over the long term has been linking to policy priorities. This means making sure that policymakers such as funders, political representatives and senior university managers understand and appreciate how Science Shops can help them to deliver on their own relevant priorities.

Developing a policy context takes time, knowledge and skill. The knowledge and skills can be learned and we hope that this handbook will go some way towards helping with this learning. However time is a separate issue and it should be noted that the suggestions here are a menu, and some readers may be able to implement more actions than others. Some readers may also already be implementing some of the actions without realising it.

Policy development work can feel challenging for Science Shop practitioners, especially in the early stages of the work. However the experience of longstanding Science Shops suggests that policy work is vital to long term success. This handbook draws lessons from the experiences of other Science Shop practitioners over the years. We hope this report will be of use to you in terms of thinking about how you might contribute to policy development in your own work.

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Figure 1 above shows some of the key structures which influence policy development within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Whilst there may be variations between different organisations, policy priorities are normally based around the three pillars of Higher Education: teaching, research and engagement. Science Shops have been successfully embedded in policy in all three areas since they normally involve students working on research projects with external organisations.

“We started out in the educational office, then moved to our research office. We’re now in student support. Our targets have varied from number of subjects, to number of community groups to numbers of students we work with. The context changes but the work stays the same.”

(Established Science Shop)

Figure 2 is a summary of the methods used to develop policy and strategy to support Science Shops in HEIs. These methods are explored in more detail in the following section. It offers four steps in developing strategy to support community engagement in HEIs: Surveying the territory; Building alliances; Making your case; and being prepared for challenges.
STEP ONE: SURVEY THE TERRITORY

Getting to know your HEI and the broader government policy context for the work of the Science Shop is the first part of successful policy development. How to go about this will vary from one HEI to another. Each HEI is unique. Some are very formal and it is difficult to break through layers of administration. Others are much more informal and it is easier to directly approach people in different areas. Desk research is a good starting point regardless of HEI structures.

Get to know the policy context in your HEI by doing desk and background research:

- Read key documents - strategic plans, research and teaching strategies for the HEI and for academic or administrative departments. What are the key priorities the HEI/department are delivering on? Where can the Science Shop model best make a contribution? Who writes the strategic plan? What are the timescales for the next version? Where is the HEI/department having trouble delivering on the strategic plans?
- Examine funding streams and what they are designed to deliver. Can The Science Shop link to any existing funding streams? Is it able to deliver added value? Is it able to deliver on an area that is currently underachieving?
- Talk to colleagues and friends who know the policy context – do you know anyone who is very good at policy influence? Can they lobby on your behalf? Can you use them to practice your elevator pitch (see Figure 6)? Are there people outside the HEI who can break through the structures?
- Get to know the agenda of your Rector/VC/Dean/Head of School – you may want to focus first on the person you have most access to, but it is worth knowing about the others as well. Read their documents, look at their research interests, read their biographies, Google them and see what comes up. Are they on social media? Follow them. Do they have a blog? Can you see any points of connection to what The Science Shop is doing? Be prepared for a time when you may meet them unexpectedly.
- Get to know the formal and informal agendas in relevant academic departments. Which are more linked to CSO agendas? Where do they have trouble getting experience for students? Where are the opportunities in the curriculum? Check formal requirements for academic skills for students/graduates and see how science shop projects can support these.
- Look out for other documents that may be useful – anything that comes across your desk, think about it through the frame of Science Shop – academic quality assurance documents may help, as may academic council reports or minutes.
- Watch out for opportunities and threats - who will support or work against Science Shop agendas? Keep a general watch on what is happening in the university, use contacts to keep in touch with who is working on what.

STEP TWO: BUILD ALLIANCES

Find the people who are likely to be supportive of the work you are doing. Some may support you on a personal or collegial basis. Others may be supportive of the transformative effect of the work on students or on CSOs.

- Analyse your social and professional networks to see where there are people who might support the Science Shop. Look across the academic structures.
- Practice your arguments. Talk to colleagues and friends about why you are committed to the Science Shop. See what connects with people. See what they want to know and whether they have any problems with the concept. If necessary, identify training to help you with this.
- Create an exemplar project (see Figure 5 below).
- Make use of tools developed within international networks – they can lend credibility to your arguments.
- Attend national and international conferences and events and build links with other Science Shops in your region and internationally – for example the biannual Living Knowledge Conference. Often your senior managers will be persuaded by what is working successfully in other HEIs, particularly those they regard as competitors or leaders.
- Identify venues and opportunities to talk to policy makers about what the Science Shop can do for them – inside and outside the HEI.
- Talk to people at all levels - sometimes junior people within a HEI can influence policy agendas and are easier to reach than senior people.
- For academics – your head of department or head of research or teaching group may be your route to senior management. Get to know how the Science Shop might fit their interests. Make them your advocate or champion if possible.
- Find venues in the HEI where people connect across faculties and the hierarchy, formally or informally. For example, learning and teaching or research seminars, or the university gym, crèche, dining facilities, etc. Where do people go to connect with others?
- Develop relationships with policymakers – once you’ve found what they’re interested in and their key targets and deliverables, find ways to connect them to the Science Shop agendas.

“One Professor realised that the project was carried out in the town where she was from, and something started to click.”
STEP THREE: MAKE YOUR CASE

Once you get to know the agendas of your senior managers, the next step is to start to lobby them. There are softer and harder lobbying techniques and not all will be appropriate in every context, so choose what is most likely to work within your HEI and what works best for your skill set. The first goal is to make sure that policy makers know what you do, the second step is to try to involve them (even in an honorary capacity) and the third goal is to get them to participate.

“We don’t really lobby, but we do go to places where we know people with influence will be and we make presentations and talk to them afterwards” (Community Engagement Initiative)

Inform by:

- Inviting people to your events, sending them information and keeping them in touch with what you are doing. Get in touch with their secretary and see if you can get time held in their diary to attend your event.
- Using internal communication routes, magazines, staff newsletters etc to make sure your work is known within the HEI.
- Getting public profile for successful projects - use your HEI’s press office or build links with local press. Take good photographs and get consent to use them publicly.
- Using social media - website, Twitter, Facebook and linking to the people you are seeking to influence.
- Developing a website to highlight your work.

See figure 5 for examples of websites, leaflets and videos from existing Science Shops.

Involve by:

- Giving senior managers an honorary role, for example in an advisory board or a student awards panel.
- Taking photos and videos which include senior managers (with their consent to use them for publicity).

Participate by:

- Contacting relevant staff to make sure you are on the mailing list for policy consultations.
- Reading draft policy documents and commenting on them, adding in specific words where possible. Small and specific changes are often easier to implement than big changes.
- Ensuring that any targets you add to documents are deliverable by you personally or by trusted partners - at this level, success is vital.
- Going to policy consultations and telling policy makers why and how the Science Shop delivers on their agendas. Asking them directly to write it in, giving them direct words where possible to make it easier for them.
- Volunteering or getting nominated for policy working groups, strategic committees, boards, advisory groups etc where possible to help build connections.
- Going to places where policy makers will be and talking to them.
- Watching out for opportunities for informal discussion - using people you know to help.
- Keeping a watching brief on what is coming in the future - for example EC policy.

Almost every longstanding Science Shop has experience of having someone in a position of authority who does not understand what they do or support what they do. Many have also faced budget or staffing cuts due to changing priorities or overall reductions in HEI funding. Successful Science Shops have understood the need to keep engaging with people at a broad level across their HEI so that they have strong support if a threat emerges. Some have also successfully shifted the focus of what they do whilst keeping the main goals of the work the same. It is important to work with every new manager and find a way to connect, mobilising other supporters where necessary. It is vital to anticipate this threat and be prepared!

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FIGURE 4: DEVELOPING YOUR ELEVATOR PITCH

STEP FOUR: PREPARE TO MOBILISE

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Prepare by:

- Understanding that policy and strategies continually move on. Many successful Science Shops have reinvented themselves where necessary.
- Ensuring that The Science Shop is written into as many different policy areas and strategic aims as possible. This means it can continue to exist even if one area loses priority.
- Continuing to maintain a listening ear and build relationships. You may rely on these relationships if a threat emerges.
- Continuing to use PR mechanisms to ensure there is an information flow on successful projects and to keep the project in the public eye and visible. Invisible projects are much easier to cut. See figure 5 overleaf for examples on how other Science Shops do this.
- Continue to work with international colleagues to help develop new initiatives and for mutual support

Conclusion

This guide has suggested a range of practical actions to help new and emerging Science Shops examine the policy context within their HEI and understand how they can influence it. More than anything, being aware and prepared is vital. It is important to both create and seize opportunities and to have the arguments ready ahead of time. Different people will develop different styles of communicating policy information; these guidelines aim to help you develop yours.

I commented on a paper for the HEI ... adding in the words ‘and community’ where business was mentioned. (The policymaker) was really grateful because I was the only person who had commented at all... now community is written right through our Educational Philosophy' (new Science Shop)
“I’m well connected, better than a lot of people more senior than me. I sit on committees and on strategy groups and it means I get talking to a lot of people and they know me….often I can move things on a bit”
(Senior Manager)

“One needs to talk to every new person in power and make the case for a Science Shop again”
(Established Science Shop)

“Just try it – I was told at the start that these colleagues would not be interested in the Science Shop but they were!”
(New Science Shop)

“We got a new manager who is less interested in Science Shops and now I need to mobilise all positive forces with me”
(Established Science Shop)