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Partnerships and ‘Knowledge Exchange’ between academia and community as a way of building a sustainable world. An interview with Dr Emma McKenna, Science Shop Coordinator at Queen’s University Belfast

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Abstract

This interview was conducted by Chrysi Kyratsou and discusses the experience of the Science Shop in facilitating partnerships across academia and community and making sure that they are mutually beneficial and sustainable through time. At the core of the initiative is the “Knowledge-Exchange” between the partners at a community-engaged project, which lends its name to the initiative as such. Dr Emma McKenna outlines the basic principles that have shaped the work undertaken by the Science Shop. She explains how the initiative stemmed from radical ideas in the 1960s, to transform largely understandings of the role of academia in addressing current problems of community, under the scope of what the community really needs. Dr McKenna elaborates on the potentials and challenges that underpin community-engaged work. She outlines the different types of partnerships that can be shaped, how the objectives are set, and the criteria which deem a partnership successful. She presents the roles of the different stakeholders who participate in a community-engaged project, and situates the activity of Science Shop between local focus and international contexts, identifying the respective potentials and challenges. Finally, Dr Emma McKenna reflects on the contribution of the Science Shop in realising Sustainable Development Goals, and sketches how further improvement and development should be understood and envisaged.

IMPACT Journal met with Dr Emma McKenna on 5 August 2021 to discuss the experience of Science Shop in ensuring sustainability in community engagement, as well as the vision of building a sustainable world and what the role of universities can be.

Keywords: Community-engaged Projects, Partnerships, Science Shop, Knowledge-exchange, SDGs.

Chrysi Kyratsou: How did the Science Shop begin and what are the basic principles that underpin its work, as well as resonate with the specific name?

Emma McKenna: The first initiatives of the Science Shop Movement emerged in the 1960s; though international, it is originally named after its Dutch equivalent “Wetenschapswinkel” that stands for “Science” meaning “Knowledge” and “Shop” as “Exchange”. Similar initiatives
thrive across UK and Ireland, although they may employ different names, such as “Student Learning with Communities” at Technological University Dublin, or “Community University Partnerships” in Brighton. We opted for Science Shop to highlight our connection with the international movement. Our primary objective under the scope of “Knowledge Exchange” is to provide useful, small-scale pieces of research to communities, as well as support students in the university to carry out research aimed at the needs of communities. In the core of this, it is to build a genuine partnership approach between the two sides, that ensures mutual benefit.

CK: Focusing on the notion of Community Engagement that is in the core of what Science Shop does, how would you outline Science Shop’s approach to this? What potentials and challenges would you identify, as envisaged and faced by each stakeholder?

EMcK: As Science Shop we would not attempt to propose a unique definition for community engagement. The reason for this, is that we work across many disciplines, for each of which apply different approaches to community engagement. However, it is vital for us that we keep a strong focus on the community need. We begin by asking what our community partner needs are, and this differentiates us from other similar initiatives. In practice, this principle means that the undertaken research assumes various approaches depending upon how “community engagement” is “translated” for each discipline. Community engagement may be “translated” as participatory research for some disciplines, as for example in Anthropology, in which case, spending time with the community partner would be expected. However, this would not be the case for a project undertaken by a student in Engineering. In the latter case, the student should answer a technical question, thus the research would take the form of gathering the data, processing the information, and getting back to the community partner with a comprehensive answer to their question.

Working with the community entails different potentials for each part that gets involved. From the perspective of the community partner, I think that it is hugely beneficial that they get a small-scale piece of research that addresses certain aspects of their work, that they would otherwise not have the capacity to figure out. They get a piece of research that answers questions they may have had but may not have had the necessary time to commit or skills, to do the research themselves.

On the other hand, from a student’s point of view, working on an applied project that answers a real-world problem can give a different flavour of what they have been studying. This experience is totally different from the -most likely- library-based experience they will have had by then, for their degree. Undertaking a community-engaged project urges students to consider someone else’s needs, negotiate and navigate the possible ways to do real research in an applied setting. Consequently, students can develop a whole range of skills useful not only for research as such, but also for communication, negotiation, and so on. Of course, we should not forget the possibility of acquiring a reference for them and getting an experience-based example of how they could apply the knowledge they’ve gained for their degree. This can be beneficial for all but makes a difference particularly for those students with an interest in applying their knowledge. Finally, supporting students to undertake projects that meet community needs can have a positive impact on the reputation of the university as an institution, too; it is a kind of boldness.

Of course, community engaged projects do entail different challenges for each of the sides involved. Time, for instance, is a common challenge students and community-partners face, though in different ways. Students apart from their studies, have other commitments too, for instance, they may work. Regarding their studies though and their completion, finishing the obligations according to the curriculum is crucial. This requirement suggests limits in the time a student can commit to their studies. Although the community-engaged project is always curriculum-based, it may involve additional time, on top of their studies, in order to be successfully completed. However, time can be challenging for community-partners too, in conjunction with the nature of the project and their other commitments, or unforeseen circumstances that may put additional pressure. As Science Shop, we do have a role in making clear upfront the time commitment that a project is going to involve for all partners, to ensure the viability of the project.

Community engagement projects may pose certain challenges to the academics too, in terms of properly supporting students, so that they can deliver a study that is of high quality for a partner. Moreover, assessing a community-engaged project in comparison with a library-based one, entails a certain degree of challenge, too —however, because the project is undertaken as part of the studies, assessment is a vital aspect.

As Science Shop, we try to address the challenges faced by each side, and thus we are challenged in terms of our capacity and time. As we want to get the best results from each project, we need to ensure that we adequately support both students and partners, and academic supervisors as well. We always try to maintain a proper balance, especially as the research needs on the side of partners tends to exceed the number of students available. “Spinning plates” is the metaphor to describe best our challenge, as we try to keep everything progressing, while maintaining the standards.

CK: What kind of partnerships are shaped between the different stakeholders? How are the objectives determined and what are the criteria to deem a partnership as successful?

EMcK: While other Science Shops may assign projects to academics, we tend to have a more active role in establishing partnerships and facilitating the collaboration between students, academic- and community-partners. We have assumed this approach, due to the particularities of the
academic settings at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB). More specifically, Science Shop at QUB has an advanced role in managing the different stages of ongoing projects, while academics mostly supervise the work conducted by the student. Another feature of the academic settings at QUB, that urges the Science Shop to assume an active role in facilitating the partnerships, is the increasing internationalisation of academic staff and enhanced academic progression. Both factors mean that the module co-ordinator role may change hands regularly. This means, that we or, most importantly, a community partner may work with an academic for the first time, and may not work with them again. While the academic may effectively engage with the responsibilities a community-engaged project involves, once they are gone, the learning that they have done in this kind of work, is gone too. Additionally, each academic may have different understandings of the settings in Northern Ireland, or different understandings even of what a community partner is. Inevitably, all these factors affect a partnership. To that end, the Science Shop acts as “linchpin”, because we have a constant presence, thus we can effectively underpin all this work. I can say that up to a certain degree, sometimes we help provide a bridge as a module is handed off to a new academic co-ordinator.

Moreover, community partners are usually interested in getting proper adequate answers to their questions, and to that end the disciplinary approach that a student offers, is decisive. After all, different disciplines offer different angles of view to a problem. A student in psychology will answer a question differently than a student in sociology because their perspective and approach are different.

Apart from liaising with the different partners though, we are currently working very actively, to develop curriculum spaces specifically for engaged research projects. Of course, across the university students can carry out engaged projects with different sectors, private, public and community. However, we focus entirely on community projects. Making space in the curriculum specifically for (community) engaged projects, is crucial in situating partnerships in the core of the curriculum. This means that a whole course is designed in such a way, that the learning outcomes are strongly interconnected with the partnership project, eventually allowing it to happen.

The objectives of each partnership are largely determined by the needs of the organization and the capacity of the interested students to contribute to their solution. The overall goal is set by the organization and their needs; what the organization aims to achieve through the particular project. We post the question they raise in a very broad manner, so that it is relevant to students from diverse disciplines. Then, based on the disciplines of the students who have expressed their interest, we have a meeting with the community-partner, trying to see how their needs are better met. And it is through careful consideration of the needs and capacities of all parts involved, and constant discussions, that the direction of the project is eventually set. The role of Science Shop in that is to ensure that broadly the objectives fit with what the student can do, as well as to ensure that their supervisor is properly informed, so that they can provide with solid feedback. Of course, this may result in further changes to the details of the project, especially when it comes to methodology, where the supervisor is the disciplinary expert.

Given that each project is distinct, considering not only the different needs, but also the approach that will be assumed to address these needs, the standards to assess whether a partnership has been successful or not, can only be variable. However, we do say to our community partners that ‘we do our best to deliver benefit over time’. This means that we are committed to meeting their needs not necessarily with every individual project –the success of which is after all dependent upon many factors-, but throughout the course of our collaboration with them for different projects. We always consider the previous experience this partner has had with us, and the overall feedback, so that we can develop our partnership in a mutually beneficial manner. Accordingly, we do ensure that students are genuinely aware of the challenges that working with a particular organization may entail. After all, it is vital that students are aware of the specific settings of an organization, and the background of the individuals they will be working with, so that they can conduct their research properly. In short, for me, it is fundamental that we are honest and clear and upfront with people, always within the boundaries of confidentiality of course.

Given that each partnership is unique, there is reasonable variability in the standards to assess it as successful. This variability is due to the partners’ expectations and standards, as well as the students’ work. However, as far as Science Shop is concerned, ideally, we regard as successful a partnership that concludes to a good piece of research and learning for all parties. That is the ideal outcome. Of course, it is integral, that no one has been harmed throughout the research, and nothing has gone terribly wrong. That said, we should bear in mind that things do go wrong in research. This is the nature of the research. Consequently, if people have managed to navigate and resolve the problems, this is also a marker of success.

CK: What are the roles of the academics, students, Science Shop and community organizations in designing, implementing and further developing a partnership?

EMcK: Academics have a huge impact on shaping and developing partnerships. I think that we are fortunate, because there has been significant change in the academic context too. This is obvious in the new institutional strategy at Queen’s, that is open to the outside world, open to our communities. I think that this suggests a very good context of a high-level quality. We have been working towards the same direction at an international level too. European Research policy for example, holds this kind of openness and engagement with stakeholders and research as absolutely vital.
Academics have a crucial role in underpinning partnerships. The different approach that academics may have as supervisors sets the tone for students. It does make a difference whether an academic is committed to the partnership idea, or to relieving a student from the challenges that a partnership project poses. Being committed to the concept of partnership means that they will work really hard to ensure that the community voice and the community need is held and upheld. Moreover, academics frame the partnership, offering the distinct disciplinary viewpoint, bringing this way, the academic rigour and the challenge to students in the heart of a partnership. The support that academics can offer make a huge difference in the quality of the project. Here we should note, that while students are responsible for conducting the partnership research project, when properly supported, they produce work of better quality. While Science Shop supports students by introducing them into the particularities of a specific organization, so that they can anticipate any possible challenges, academics support students intellectually and on a disciplinary level.

Community organizations on the other hand shape the partnership in a different manner. Their contribution is bound to their standards, expectations, and the degree of engagement they wish to have with the student. Each organization has their own scope. Some people for example in community organizations –I always joke and say that they are frustrated researchers; they already gather data and seek evidence to support their case solidly. Other organizations need support in doing research from scratch. Whatever the case may be, it is crucial that the community partners think over their ideal role in a partnership and articulate it clearly. Community partners engage differently with students, and this reflects to the character of the partnership too. Some organizations may merely set the direction of the research, and they will not engage with the student anymore. Other organizations want to have a deep insight into how the student approaches the topic of research, and they actively support them in whichever way possible, as for example by providing them with information or contacts and so on. This can also depend on the nature of the research itself.

CK: Science Shop has been active in facilitating and undertaking research both in international and local contexts. How would you outline the broad experience across different contexts?

EMcK: There is a strong Science Shop international network and Queen’s Science Shop has been part of the founding team, actively building this network. We have been participating in conferences, organising committees. Thus, we are part of those circles, and we can share good practices across internationally. Moreover, we have been involved in several European projects. Currently we are coordinating an Erasmus+ project, named CIRCLET (Curriculum Innovation through Research with Communities: Learning circles of Educators and Technology).8 Previously, we were involved as Deputy Coordinators in the project EnRRICH (Enhancing Responsible Research and Innovation through Curricula in Higher Education),9 and in the PERARES (Public Engagement with Research And Research Engagement with Society) project.10 Participating in all these projects surpasses being in a disciplinary space; it involves coordinating these kinds of good practices. It is the focus of these practices that really matters. Turning our attention to what we do in local contexts, I think that there is still more to be done to serve the existing needs in Northern Ireland. While there is a fantastic experience of students, at Queen’s too, working on community issues, there is still more to do so that we feel satisfied with meeting the need in Northern Ireland. Here, it should be noted that the funding-stream we receive to deliver our projects is focused on delivering to the community in Northern Ireland.

International research projects can be pretty challenging too. Our experience with the PERARES project is indicative of that. We led the work-package on building community engagement into curricula. However, I also worked closely with the colleagues engaged in the work-package aimed at involving students in research in collaboration across different countries on similar topics. However, some very hard challenges emerged in managing this work-package, as the students picked up really tough questions, as for example on domestic violence in pregnancy. While it is fantastic to do research in such contexts, it can also be really overwhelming. This kind of work can thrive at an academic level. Ideally, if an academic is involved in an international project, and then employ some students and supervise their work, that could be highly beneficial. However, this kind of work, exceeds the scope of what we could do as Science Shop.

CK: Based on the research already undertaken by Science Shop, how would you outline its contribution to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

EMcK: Looking at our community research topics and thinking over their potential contribution to SDGs, we have realised that pretty much all of them are relevant to an SDG. And this is due to the gravity of SDGs, but also due to the fact that most issues that communities raise, connect to them. If the answer to the question ‘how do you change the world?’, is ‘you change it through people’, then we can say that this is what the Science Shop does. Through the engaged projects we undertake and support we expose students to this particular research approach. Engaged research becomes part of their degree programme. Hopefully, the outcome of this, is that our students graduate and go into the world as people who are more aware of community problems. Of course, there are some disciplines that by default are orientated towards addressing and tackling societal issues. However, this is not always the case. I remember for instance, a student concluding after a meeting that ‘we completely underestimated how much that organization would know’. This is quite common actually; unless someone works with community organizations, they do not always realise the insights community organizations have. Students learn through these
kinds of engaged projects the benefit of a partnership approach to research, and how to effectively address societal needs. We can never know at this stage where students are going to end up, and how what they learn as part of their studies will enable them to make a difference. As far as I’m concerned, the biggest contribution a university can make towards achieving the SDGs, is supporting students’ learning, and equipping their students properly.

CK: Science Shop at Queen’s University Belfast already counts decades of commitment to community-engaged projects. How do you envisage further improvement and development of the initiative in the years to come?

EMcK: What is critical to address at this point, is to integrate engaged research projects into the curriculum, and to adequately support academics to undertake such projects with their students. Under this scope, the CIRCLET project helps towards this direction, as it focuses on supporting the academics to embed community engaged research and learning in their modules. Last year we worked with ten academics in Queen’s and two in our online Continuing Professional Development (CPD) module in the project. We allow for small-scale projects, that could be part of a module, rather than a fully-fledged dissertation piece. One academic referred to this approach as ‘lower risk’ especially for those academics trialling community engagement for the first time.

While the scale of research does affect the outcome, we try to find the proper balance where the outcome is valuable, and at the same time is the result of a manageable project integrated to the curriculum.

When we started the Science Shop, the idea of engaged research was really radical. There were a few academics in social sciences who were interested in doing engaged research, but the norm was that academics did not do engaged research. It feels that over time that I have been working, the idea of ‘engaged research’ has just moved so far forward. Hopefully, in another ten years, we could be in an even better environment, as long as we move in the right direction.

**References**


CIRCLET project - it’s all about learning circles. CIRCLET Project. (n.d.). https://circlet.eu/

1 For a comprehensive discussion about the Science Shop in Europe you may see Fischer et al. (2004).