TRANS-NATIONL REPORT

ENtRANCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH (CBR) STUDENT PROJECTS
SOCIETAL IMPACT EVALUATION

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Through community Based Research (CBR) projects, students collaborate with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) on a societal topic, supervised by an experienced researcher. In some higher education institutions, CBR student projects are supported by Science Shops: intermediary mechanisms in between students, CSOs and supervisors/lecturers. CBR projects are aiming for societal impact, but how do CSOs evaluate the projects they have been involved in and students they have collaborated with? Have the project results been useful to them and impacted their (way of) work?

Within the ENtRANCE project (2017-1-BE02-KA203-034736, co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the EU) Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB-BE), Wageningen University & Research (WU-NL) and Lahti University of Applied Sciences (LUAS-FIN) have surveyed (72) and interviewed (23 of) their CSO partners in order to measure the benefits and impact of Science Shop/CBR student projects, by addressing both an outcome and process perspective. While CBR projects at VUB and WU are supported by a Science Shop since decennia, in LUAS CBR takes place through direct contact between lecturers (and subsequently their students) and CSOs – without Science Shop support.

Following the interviewed/surveyed CSOs, CBR student project results lead to a better understanding of the societal topic in the first place and are useful for internal communication/use in a second place. The majority of CSOs expressed their satisfaction with the research results and most of them consider their goals reached with the delivered research results. The most frequent action taken with the research results in all three countries is internal communication.

CSOs appreciate CBR projects because it's offering free research and time, it's based on a (sometimes seldomly earlier researched) topic originating in their community/practice and because it's scientifically valid. Furthermore, they welcome fresh student ideas and perspectives. In general, CSOs are pleased with their Science Shop/institutional CBR contact and open for more regular collaboration thanks to the structured process, coordination & administrative support they offer, together with care & enthusiasm. They also appreciate the project flexibility along the way and welcome new insights and developments but combined with academic time schedules this also implies the danger of delay in their opinion.

Most CSOs are pleased with the general research process and start meetings. On the other hand, VUB and LUAS CSOs reported on a lack of communication between students and CSOs in some CBR projects. Almost 95% of VUB CSOs agree with implementing an intermediate meeting (in general or in case problems arise) – with student, CSO and Science Shop. CSOs appreciate working with students because of three reasons: their fresh ideas & energy, intrinsic motivation and topic commitment and the fact that they are able to work proactively and relatively autonomous. Student skills CSOs value most within collaborations are General research skills, Collaboration skills, Situational awareness and Openness & transparency.

Taken into account the different way of CBR work in the three involved institutions – supported by Science Shop or not, one could wonder: **What is and/or could be the role of a Science Shop in this impact story?**

Although 98% of VUB and WU CSOs that completed the survey confirm that Science Shops have added value, LUAS CSOs don't seem to miss the intermediate structure very often. Pleased LUAS CSOs are the highest in number (compared to VUB and WU ones) when it comes to the goals reached by the research (although an even larger LUAS percentage doesn't remember this anymore) and the broadened university network. Furthermore, 81% of LUAS CSOs is open for regular collaboration, compared to 71% of VUB CSOs and 50% of WU CSOs. Also, 50% of LUAS CSOs knows the institutional CBR services through a university contact, which means those are widely known and promoted through university staff.

But in some cases the existence or lack of a Science Shop may have impact. When it comes to the accessibility of lecturers/Science Shop, the lower LUAS rates could be the consequence of the absence of a clear way of work to collaborate with LUAS students and lecturers. On the other hand, the lower VUB rates (65%) could be the consequence also of the absence of a newsletter, updated website, social media account etc. – compared to the high WU rates (91%). CBR taking place directly through lecturers and supervisors, without support of an intermediary mechanism or Science Shop – like in LUAS, seems to cause a lack of continuous CBR evaluation, monitoring and overview within the institution.

Also, the lower and more anonymous survey and interview response rate of LUAS compared to VUB and WU may be related to the fact that LUAS CSOs were invited by a LUAS staff member they are not familiar with, whereas VUB and WU CSOs were invited by the Science Shop contact person they may have been in touch with earlier. Known and reliable Science Shop intermediaries may be important in this CSO networking frame, but one could also argue that the LUAS response rate would be higher in case the in CBR projects involved lecturers would have invited the CSOs they have been collaborating with earlier. Furthermore, considering the average FTEs in the CSOs the involved partners are working with and the main Science Shop focus on not-for-profit organizations, one could say that smaller and voluntary CSOs may benefit from the existence of Science Shops.

Some VUB and WU CSO's felt a need for support with the implementation of the outcomes. But one could wonder if such an implementation support belongs to Science Shop's responsibility. This could count as a side effect of the existence of a Science Shop: creating too many/high expectations from CSOs…