

Focus Group Report
Science-Shop at EHU

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2022

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INTRODUCTION

Science-Shop is a new opportunity offered by the European Humanities University for the implementation of project activities in the field of civic engagement. The program is specifically aimed at delivering the projects by the students with the support of their teachers and supervisors within the training courses, as well as course and annual projects at EHU. What is important, research topics and project directions are proposed by civil society organizations and independent researchers, taking into account their real needs and requests. On behalf of EHU, Science-Shop is acting as an intermediary in the process of facilitating partnership contacts between academia and civil organizations, providing coordination and support for all participants involved in project activities. Thus, the goal of the program is consistent with the mission of the University — to support the development of civil society for students from Belarus and the region, through quality education, promoting European values and agility as a timely and adequate response to changes in external and internal social environments.

Projects of 2021/2022

The projects and internships below mark the first, pilot semester of the OSUN Science Shop at EHU.

Project 1: Digital solutions for online citizenship

Course: Digital Technologies and Law

Faculty: Inesa Stolper

Community partner: Meta-Belarus

Project 2: Research on psychological support for Belarusian exiles

Course: Digital Technologies and Law

Faculty: Andrei Vazyanau

Community partner: PsyVilnius

Project 3: Card game on gender inequality

Course: Final projects internship for the students of the BA program "Visual Design"

Curators: Kseniya Shtalenkova and Natalya Mikhailova

Community partner: Lygių galimybių plėtros centras

Project 4: SMM materials against stigmatization

Course: Final projects internship for the students of the BA program "Visual Design"

Curators: Kseniya Shtalenkova and Natalya Mikhailova

Community partner: Rigra paramos fondas

Project 5: System of Visual Communication for the "PsyVilnius" initiative

Course: Final projects internship for the students of the BA program "Visual Design"

Curator: Kseniya Shtalenkova

Community partner: PsyVilnius

Project 6: Research on minorities representations in Lithuanian media

Course: Media, communication, and discrimination

Curators: Andrei Vazyanau

Community partner: Lietuvos žmogaus teisių centras

The Focus group's research goal is to improve the Science Shop program at EHU. The main purpose is to provide data to enhance, change or create new ways for further delivering the projects by the students with the support of their teachers and supervisors within the training courses, as well as course and annual projects at EHU.

METHODOLOGY

English-language focus group discussion guides were developed by Héra Gábor, a research, sociologist, who is working on the evaluation of projects and organizations. Three different guides were used to work with 3 target groups.

An acculturation scale of 3 sections of questions was included. The participant questionnaires form was administered before commencing the focus group discussion. Both the participant questionnaires form and the discussion guide were initially written in English and then translated orally (if needed) into Russian.

Target groups

According to the Science Shop program projects 2022 target groups are:

- Civil society organizations;
- EHU students;
- EHU faculty.

Participant Questionnaire

Questionnaires were also prepared for each target group as part of the assessment of the work of the Science-Shop. The questionnaires, in this case, were instruments of qualitative orientation and were offered before the start of the course and cooperation.

Focus Group Instrument Development

Three focus groups were conducted via Zoom in July 2022.

Date	Participants
14.07.2022	Students
15.07.2022.	Faculty
19.07.2022.	Civil society organization

Additionally, some focus group participants provided written comments that were included in the report.

QUESTIONNAIRES

The questionnaires, in this case were an instruments of qualitative orientation and were offered before the start of the course and cooperation.

Each type of questionnaire sets a different goal, taking into account the target group.

Each type of questionnaire was completed by 4 representatives of each group, which significantly reduces the quality of the research.

- Questionnaire – Students

The main goal to understand more of how students see their skills, attitudes and perceptions at the beginning of the course and the partnership.

Most students feel confident in their ability to conduct research and to interpret the findings of a research. They understand what everyday research work is like.

Students were agreeing and absolutely agree with the statement that they can work in a team in order to achieve collective goals and they are aware of their skills that support and hinder teamwork.

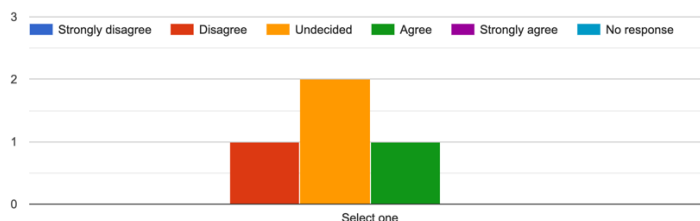
Many students were ready to manage projects and can develop a logical, consistent approach to address a real-world problem related to this course.

Students are interested in exploring the problems of society, but not all of them were familiar with the principles and objectives of the civil society (non-profit) sector and with the main challenges the civil society sector faces nowadays in their country (Belarus/Lithuania).

According to the result, the questioner students have a strong civic commitment and believe that all citizens have a responsibility towards their community, and it is important for the university to use its resources for the benefit of society.

Students' opinions were radically divided in matters related to the university. Some of the students were not satisfied with the education provided by EHU and felt not valued at the university.

I am satisfied with the education provided by my university



At the same time students strongly agree and agree with statement, that their university is dedicated to contributing to the resolution of social problems.

All students have civic experience (working / volunteering for a non-profit organization), but 75% of students don't have work experience. 100% of students have considered working in the non-profit sector and have plans to work in the non-profit sector.

- Questionnaire – Faculty

The main goal is to understand how faculty see their skills, attitudes, and perception of working with an external, non-profit organization at the beginning of the partnership.

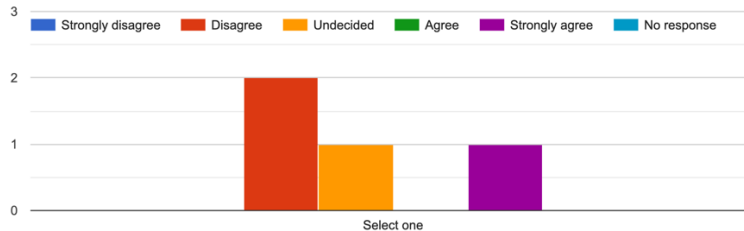
Faculty members were less confident in their teaching skills such as experiential learning, engaged and service learning, community-based teaching and learning, civic engagement,

citizen science, and participatory action research. Contrariwise many of them use participatory techniques with students in the learning process.

All of the faculty members were aware of the advantages of engaging their students with external community groups as part of my teaching.

Some of the faculty members disagree with statement:

I am aware of the disadvantages of engaging my students with external community groups as part of my teaching.



On the other hand, all faculty members proclaim that having real-world experience in their class is a priority for them.

In opposite to the answers of student’s the faculty members agree and absolutely agree with the statement, that EHU demonstrates a sense of responsibility for social and societal issues. All of the faculty members agree, that their job contributes to the public good and are convinced that cooperation between an CS) and a university can benefit both parties. Not all faculty members generally know how to find and contact relevant CSO of their interest, which gives meaning to the work of the Science-Shop team.

Faculty members strongly agree with the importance of the university using its resources for the benefit of society. They also consider it important to raise issues in their courses regarding social issues and improve students’ critical thinking in relation to them.

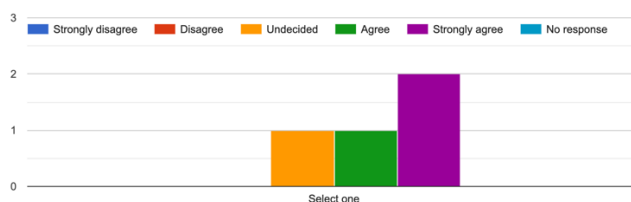
Faculty is familiar with the principles and objectives of the civil society sector and has a responsibility and a commitment to using their knowledge and skills to help address issues in society through teaching. 75% of faculty members had previous civic engagement experience.

- Questionnaire – Civil society organizations

The main goal is to understand how CSO see their skills, attitudes, and perception of working with students and lecturers at the beginning of the partnership.

Representatives of CSO agree and strongly agree with the statement that organization has developed credibility for the work they have done. At the same time, most of them undedicated on the statement:

Trust in our organization is boosted if we can demonstrate the effectiveness of our work with research data.



Representatives of CSO know the situation and needs of the social group that they represent/serve and they can respond to the needs of our target group. Nevertheless, most of them have undedicated objective, reliable data introducing the situation and needs of the social group that they represent/serve.

Regarding the ability to conduct research, the answers were divided 50/50 and many of the representatives were undedicated on the limitations of the different research methods.

Representatives of CSO believe that it is important to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work with data.

Concerning cooperation with universities, representatives are aware of how universities work and aware of the benefits of involving university students in their work. Therefore they are confident that cooperation between a CSO and a university can benefit both parties.

50% had previous experience cooperating with university/research institute and 50% hadn't.

FOCUS GROUPS DISCUSSION RESULTS

The first focus group: students.

One of the three focus groups were EHU students. Moreover, students were the most active discussion participants, which helped to collect the necessary data.

Representatives of three projects joined the meeting:

Project 1: Digital solutions for online citizenship

Course: Digital Technologies and Law

Faculty: Inesa Stolper

Community partner: Meta-Belarus

Project 2: Research on psychological support for Belarusian exiles

Course: Digital Technologies and Law

Faculty: Andrei Vazyanau

Community partner: PsyVilnius

Project 6: Research on minorities representations in Lithuanian media

Course: Media, communication, and discrimination

Curators: Andrei Vazyanau

Community partner: Lietuvos žmogaus teisių centras

Before starting the course, few of the students knew about the Science-Shop. Heard from the newsletter about a new opportunity at EHU but showed little interest in looking into it. The faculty at the first class of the course told the students about the possibility of cooperation with the Science-Shop. Thus, students learned about Science-Shop directly through the course.

"Ekaterina Maksimova (CSO) came to our class, she was introduced to us by Ksenya Shtalenkova. After that, there was an understanding of what the SS is and a desire to cooperate."

The group of students went to discuss their backgrounds and their impression about Science Shop. Many participants noted that they were impressed by the opportunity to work on the training course and interact within the Science-Shop. It was difficult for the participants to articulate expectations, as most had never heard of such initiatives before.

In addition, some students describe expectations towards the course. Most participants said that they think, that the course will be theoretical without the ability to create real projects. Therefore, the ability to create projects and work with CSO caused more interest in the course.

Additionally, in one of the courses, it was necessary to take practical tasks and come up with practical tasks and ideas during the project itself. Collaboration with the Science-Shop helped to create real projects and complete course assignments within the framework of projects.

“As part of the course, we had to complete about 12 practical tasks that we had to come up with. Thanks to the work on the project within the Science-Shop, I didn’t have to invent anything, since the assignments were a real part of my project with CSO.”

At the very beginning of the course, students expected to receive practical work skills from the CSO, help from the faculty in organizing work on the project, and from the course the theoretical basis for implementing projects in practice.

Students shared their learning experiences within the course: how it was, what they liked the most, or if there was anything they disliked.

Most of the students answered that they liked that there were meetings with CSO during the course and there was an opportunity to ask representatives of CSO questions. Also, the faculty organized the work well and set deadlines and goals for each group. The faculty collected all the information and made it available on a virtual whiteboard where one could ask CSO representatives questions.

“Our teacher created a virtual whiteboard with all the necessary information and helped to coordinate all the work on the project”

Another part of the students, on the contrary, liked the lack of strict deadlines and the teacher's intervention in the process of creating a project. Many students did not have enough study hours to work on the project.

“I would like to have more time to work on the project, but the amount of hours in the course is not enough”

Speaking about whether the course helped the students and changed something for them, the students mainly said that the course helped them to work with a large amount of information and create scientific products. In addition, speaking about legal courses, the course completely changed the idea of studying in the legal field, as it gave students the opportunity to work with practical assignments and cooperate with CSO already in the first year of study.

If we are talking about personal skills, that have been improved and to raise awareness about CS sector, most of the students said that the course helped them to learn how work of the civil sector is structured and how it is possible to establish cooperation with other civil organizations. There was also a part of the students who did not learn anything new from the work of the civil sector, since they have been working with CSO for a long time (3rd and 4th-year students). But at the same time, this part of the students learned how to prepare the research necessary for CSO, which they had not done before.

“We didn’t learn super new things, but we worked in a new direction (research for CSO).”

Working on projects in the framework of the course enhances students' responsibility and commitment to addressing issues in our society. For example:

The idea of a smart contract project is really useful and working on its implementation will have a certain impact on society, which motivates to continue working.

The course helped to establish cooperation between students and CSO and gave every opportunity to continue such cooperation for the benefit of society.

"In addition, the course helped me to believe that it is possible to become a part of the civil sector here and now. And also, thanks to EHU and Science-Shop to continue cooperation with CSO and specifically by their actions to influence what is happening in the society"

Interestingly, when answering the question of whether the impression of the university has changed, opinions are divided into two parts. One part said no, the opinion about the university remained the same. The second part of the students answered yes, because they compared the opportunities provided in Belarusian universities and EHU. From the first academic year at EHU, the method of experiential learning has been dominating in the courses.

"It's cool that the EHU presents a practical opportunity for a freshman. This is not the case at Belarusian State University. You can already work and benefit society from the first year of study."

Students also shared their recommendations regarding participation in projects and interaction with CSO. Probably should just leave a quote:

"Professional contacts, practice, future job, experience, a line in the portfolio/CV"

At the end of the discussion, students shared several recommendations that, in their opinion, could improve the work of the Science-Shop and the quality of projects.

For the Science-Shop team:

- To arrange everything about the possibilities of the SS in the guide. Focus on: What is it for students? What are the potential benefits of participating in the Science-Shop program for students?
- More specifically, write about the possibilities of financial support from the Science-Shop.
- Expand opportunities for financial support.

"Support financially post-production, dissemination of research"

For faculty:

- The problem with evaluating the contribution of projects to the final grade for the course. Try to initially set a clear percentage of the final assessment for project activities.

From the above, we can see that the students gave complete answers to the questions which they were asked and helped to identify the strengths of the work of the Science-Shop in the framework of the EHU courses. No weaknesses in the work of the Science-Shop on the part

of the students were identified. Moreover, the students offered their recommendations for the development and improvement of the work of the Science-Shop.

Thus, the Science-Shop at EHU really coped with its goals:

- to strengthen ties between the academy and civic organizations in Belarus, Lithuania,
- to research local civic initiatives in the context of current developments in civic engagement.
- to support and develop the practices of experiential learning, engaged and service learning, community-based teaching and learning, civic engagement, citizen science and participatory action research

The second focus group: Faculty members

Faculty members were less active, and some did not participate in the focus group, so the information was not fully collected. Some faculty members have preliminary information from the description of the project at the website of the university. Later, they received more information from the individual session/consultation with the Science-Shop project team.

“My understanding was that the project aims to connect academia with civil society in order to conduct research, which could address one of the issues particular civil society organizations work with.”

The general impression of Science-Shop at EHU was positive. Many faculty members believe that academic courses should incorporate modern questions, and students have to be exposed to current practical challenges. Additionally, faculty members can't say that they have precise expectations. Generally, they expected to be assisted to connect with a CSO and help to start the collaboration. In this sense, their expectations were met and exceeded by the Science-Shop project team. Thinking back to the beginning of the course faculty members expected from CSO – interesting new experience.

That was my first experience in collaboration with CSO in the framework of an academic course. Thus, I was mainly curious about what result we could have. I like experimenting with teaching methods.

Mainly, faculty members expected that the student engaged more deeply with the topics of the course and the topic of the research/project. Most faculty noted that their first thought would be that it was super interesting, and collaboration with CSO made the course livelier. Additionally, there were no negative comments.

“I liked working meetings with CSOs representatives most. Very often we had quite heated debates between students and representatives about the research topics, which stimulated discussion and critical thinking skills development in students and even me sometimes.”

Talking about the changes which we were aware of, thanks to the Science-Shop, most faculty members found difficult to answer.

“Difficult to say, I think it brought more changes for students, who early in their studies had an opportunity to work on practical problems, deliver a report and receive feedback from CSO. I believe it is important to stimulate students' research. The collaboration with CSO continues. Representatives of CSO will contribute

to the summer school on law and technologies in August 2022 at EHU.”

The collaboration with Science-Shop raise awareness about the civil society (non-profit) sector. Before the project many faculty members personally even did not know that such an organization exists. The project team found and connected them with the representative of CSO.

Additionally, the Science-Shop project made the faculty members' responsibility and commitment stronger to address issues in society through.

“The topic concerned decentralized dispute resolution systems. We had a lot of discussions about the independence and impartiality of jurors (judges) in such systems. This topic is not widely covered in scientific literature, however decentralized systems of dispute resolution become more and more popular. The research of this issue helped CSO who is working on integrating such systems into smart contracts to analyse identified associated risks and consider implementing recommendations.”

Faculty, as well as students, evaluate the work of the Science-Shop from the positive side, focusing on the personal contribution Science-Shop team.

“Yes, Natalya and Kseniya did a good job”

Furthermore, many faculty members noticed, that academic subjects should not be taught in isolation of current issues. Collaboration with CSO helped to "bring" such current issue into classroom and increase the interest of students to the subject.

The expectations of faculty that were at the very beginning of the work were fully fulfilled.

“Yes, it met my expectations and exceed it.”

Some faculty members said, that launching a course within the framework of Science Shop makes the course more interesting for students, increases student research capacity, and contributes to addressing social, economic, political, etc. issues. This way recommends other faculty to cooperate with Science-Shop. There are no specific recommendations from the faculty side, except one: at least one year is required for the implementation of projects.

“Can't think about anything to improve. I guess it was only a pity that we worked only for one semester. I think if it was a one-year program/project, more results could be achieved.”

Many faculty members shared their experience in collaboration with the Science-Shop team. They evaluate on the highest level such collaboration and that engagement level was just perfect.

“My experience with the team was great! Very helpful, supporting, encouraging, attentive, always ready to answer questions”

Unfortunately, the faculty were less active in the focus groups, which made it difficult to collect the full material and make a qualitative analysis. However, from the responses received, the faculty appreciate the work of the Science-Shop and the contribution of the Science-Shop projects to the study of the courses at a high level. An essential

recommendation from faculty is to expand the time frame for the implementation of projects.

The third focus group: The Civil society organization

Some representatives of CSO had no particular expectations from cooperation with the university. At the same time, another part of the representatives of CSO expected to receive a practical product and greater student engagement.

"We discussed our expectations, needs for our organizations, and expected to improve our visual design. Young people are more innovative and more knowledgeable about modern design and this is what we expected from students."

Many of representatives of CSO expected more from the course project and many hope that projects will continue to exist. Most of all, representatives of CSO disliked that they need to teach students basic skills:

"I did not like spending time on explanations of what to do and how to do and where to find information and examples on how to create or just to make a copy."

Additionally, some representatives mentioned, that they could not fully engage with students on projects, according to their employment.

Due to the course project, some representatives of CSO learned a lot about themselves and their representativeness in society. Others were glad that the ideas of their organization were being researched at the university level. Course project helps CSO to increase their ability to understand and respond to the needs of the community they represent and at the same time for many CSO do not expand their knowledge about higher education.

After the collaboration, CSO changed their opinion about EHU and for some CSO it once again reinforced their confidence that EHU provides a place for creativity and freedom for students.

"Collaboration improved awareness about EHU. "

There are two different opinions on course preliminary expectations. For some CSO course partly meets their preliminary expectations:

"Partially. As topic was about visuals and designs, we expected more modern designs, according to social advertising."

Another part fully covers their expectations, especially with research projects.

There were also some recommendations for improving the program, namely:

- to think and to evaluate the possibilities to complete a task, to complete tasks on time and alternative ways of students to complete work.
- more clearly define financial opportunities

Many representatives of CSO hope that the project can be continued in other courses and with other students. The field for research is very extensive. Cooperation between CSO and university can benefit both. Sharing information among institutions could improve awareness of both.

"If there is not enough time for something, the university will always help."

CONCLUSIONS

1. No weaknesses in the work of the Science-Shop were identified.
2. The Science-Shop program has helped the development of civil society for students from Belarus and the region, through quality education, promoting European values and agility as a timely and adequate response to changes in external and internal social environments according to the students' projects, responses of students, faculty and CSO.
3. Science-Shop program helped to find and to connect faculty members with CSO according to their field of interest. Which made it possible for the faculty to use the experiential learning, engaged and service learning, community-based teaching and learning, civic engagement methods in their courses.
4. The ability to create projects and work with CSO in framework of the course and from the first year of study makes university courses more in demand and develop practical skills.
5. Collaboration with the Science-Shop and CSO helped to create projects and to research local civic initiatives in the context of current developments in civic engagement.
6. Collaboration with CSO helped to "bring" local civic initiatives into the classroom and increase the interest of students in the subject.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To arrange everything about the possibilities of the Science-Shop in guide. Focus on: What is it for students? What are the potential benefits of participating in the Science-Shop program for students?
2. More specifically, write about the possibilities of financial support from the Science-Shop and expand opportunities for financial support.
3. Try to solve the problem with evaluating the contribution to projects which is affecting the final grade for the course. To propose to faculty initially set a clear percentage of the final assessment for project activities.
4. To expand the time frame for the implementation of projects (2 semesters).