Round Table

"Promising Practices: Linking Students and NGOs"

Contents

1. Introduction

For four consecutive years, Share-Net Netherlands has been organising the annual event 'Linking students and NGOs', whereby:

- NGOs formulate their research questions and share these with students through an *NGO research factsheet*;
- students present the *findings of their Master's thesis* to NGO practitioners; and
- students and NGOs *speed date* in order to get to know each other and to discuss societal-relevant research questions that could be interesting for students to focus on in their Master's thesis.

The aim of this annual meeting is to stimulate applied Master's research and research-informed practice. Student-NGO collaborations, such as student internships at NGOs, is one way of stimulating this. There are indications that student-NGO collaborations are taking off among Share-Net members. These indications include an increasing interest in the annual event 'Linking students and NGOs' and an increasing number of abstract submissions from students who have conducted their research in collaboration with an NGO.

This positive development brings up new questions, such as how to regulate such collaborations through a set of guidelines that can be used by NGOs and universities to streamline their communication.

To address these questions, the Share-Net round table 'Promising Practices: Linking students and NGOs' was organised to discuss promising practices of student-NGO collaborations, including its challenges and lessons learned, in order to develop a set of guidelines that can be used by NGOs and universities. The round table took place at Oxfam Novib, the Hague, on November 26th 2015, and was organised by the Share-Net Netherlands working group 'Linking research, policy and practice'[1].

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[1] This round table was organized by Oxfam Novib, STOP AIDS NOW!, Simavi, University of Amsterdam, Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, VU University, Maastricht University, University of Nijmegen, The Royal Topical Institute (KIT), Global Network for People living with HIV (GNP+)

1.1 Objectives of the meeting

The objectives of the meeting were to:
- discuss *promising practices*, including challenges and lessons learned, on strengthening linkages between research and practice through student-NGO collaborations; and to
- develop *a set of guidelines* that can be used by NGOs and universities to structure/streamline communication between them in relation to student research assignments/internships.

1.2 Programme

15.00 Introduction by chair
Esther Miedema, UvA

15.10 Promising practice 1: Collaboration ISS - Oxfam Novib Academy
Pitch: Hedda van Heijzen, Oxfam Novib Academy. Reflections: Srushti Mahamuni (student ISS) and Wendy Harcourt (supervisor ISS).

15:25 Promising practice 2: Collaboration UvA - STOP AIDS NOW!
Pitch: Yvette Fleming, STOP AIDS NOW! Reflections: Eva Vernooij (PhD student UvA) and Ria Reis (supervisor UvA).

15.40 Promising practice 3: Collaboration VU – Simavi
Pitch: Karine Balyan, Simavi. Reflections: Annabel Buzink (student UvA).

15:55 Break

16.10 Discussion

16.55 Closure and plan of action by chair

The promising practices were introduced and discussed from three perspectives: the NGO, the university/supervisor, and the student. The NGOs pitched the promising practices in 3 minutes after which two Master students, a PhD student and two university supervisors involved in the collaborations shared their experiences and provided input based on what had been pitched.

After the pitches, plenary discussion focused on the draft protocol that was shared with the participants prior to the meeting (see Annex 2. Terms of Reference (ToR)/Guidelines). The pitches were filmed[2] and two of them – Oxfam Novib Academy and UvA-STOP AIDS NOW! – are annexed.

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[2] The pitches were filmed and edited by Igor Koval-Molodtsov.

2. Report of the meeting

2.1 Introduction

Esther Miedema welcomes the participants and introduces the background of the Share-Net working group 'Linking research, policy and practice'. She explains student-NGO collaborations as emerging issue and clarifies the objectives and expected outputs of the meeting.

2.2 Pitches

Oxfam Novib Academy, STOP AIDS NOW! and Simavi have each developed a 3-minute pitch detailing:

- their experience of the primary *advantages* of either working with MA level and/or doctoral level researchers (and how this ties in with their expectations of the collaboration);
- their experience of the primary *challenges* of either working with MA level and/or doctoral level researchers, and ideas as to how to overcome these challenges;
- whether they had established an *agreement/communication protocol* to streamline communication between NGO-student-University, and if so, what in their view is most crucial to arrange to ensure smooth cooperation and good communication?

The students and supervisors are asked to share their experiences and provide input based on what has been pitched.

2.2.1 Pitch Oxfam Novib Academy

Pitch by Hedda van Heijzen, Oxfam Novib:
Twice a year, a badge of students do a research internship at Oxfam Novib. Through these internships at the so-called Oxfam Novib Academy, Oxfam Novib aims to increase its scientific perspective and to work more evidence-based. They experience that Master students bring new perspectives, insights and critiques.

The major challenge of this type of student-NGO collaborations is the difference between the academic way and the NGO way of working: the time period of conducting research is longer, and it's more scientific compared to hands-on and concrete. This can create some friction but communication helps to find a middle-way and to incorporate the academic field.

Oxfam Novib Academy organizes face-to-face meetings between the NGO mentor, the student and the university supervisor. These meetings help to make assumptions, expectations and challenges explicit. The Oxfam Novib Academy continually improves their instructions and protocols for the students starting at their Academy. The presentation used during the pitch can be found in Annex 3. Presentation Oxfam Novib Academy.

Reflection from Srushti Mahamuni, Master's student ISS:

The Oxfam Novib Academy gave Srushti the opportunity to see how things work in an NGO and to access a network of practitioners and SRHR experts. She experienced a gap between what the university and the NGO expected from her. Sometimes it was manageable but in the end she ended up writing two separate studies. She often felt that her potential was not being used to its fullest in the NGO. Therefore, she discussed with Oxfam Novib to provide students a more structured list of tasks to do in the office and suggested to future students to be more proactive in picking up responsibility.

Reflection from Wendy Harcourt, supervisor ISS:

As a supervisor, Wendy thinks it takes a special person to be able to navigate these worlds of both the university and the NGO. She thinks the politics of doing research in academia is different from research in an NGO environment, such as the purpose of doing research. Srushti wrote two kinds of research: she was critical about the interest in masculinities and also about methodologies. It was a positive outcome but it did take a lot of work. Wendy feels that we need to be aware that they are two different projects and that it takes the right person who can do that balancing act.

Wendy discusses that all parties need to be on the same page about ethical concerns, such as the student's safety when going abroad for fieldwork. These frictions are something you can learn from. At the heart of it all, academic knowledge is different from policy knowledge: we need to recognize that and see how to work around that. It is good to have discussion around what it means for the type of collaborations and the knowledge output you want to have: there are many types of knowledge and we can't ask the student to balance this alone. It needs to be discussed what is acceptable for the university and for the NGO. It is about the

politics of knowledge: what we are we trying to create in student-NGO collaborations is a different kind of knowledge.

2.2.2   Pitch UvA – STOP AIDS NOW!

Pitch by Yvette Fleming, Aids Fonds – STOP AIDS NOW! – Soa Aids Nederland:
In 2010, STOP AIDS NOW! was granted the MaxART project which addresses HIV infections in Swaziland. Because it was felt important to incorporate academic research in this project, UvA has been involved from the start. The donor allowed the organisations time to build this programme together and to set up a good model for collaboration. The project had the following starting points: to build the capacity of local researchers by offering them an eight month training course in the Amsterdam Masters in Medical Anthropology (AMMA) at UvA in the Netherlands; to conduct quality research alongside the programme by local researchers who are hired for three years; and, if the amount of research is valuable enough, to provide those researchers the opportunity to write up their research findings into a PhD dissertation sponsored through UvA. Providing academic research training and supervision is costly and timely and it was appreciated that the donor was willing to fund this. The consortium consisted of a multidisciplinary group of people with different backgrounds, different languages, and different starting points, which could be challenging. For instance, research could be criticized along the way for being less important than the intervention itself, and some consortium partners considered evaluation findings to be a critique on their performance.

Reflection from Eva Vernooij, PhD student UvA:
Eva joined the MaxART project as the social science coordinator in 2011, and later started her PhD research linked to the MaxART programme in 2012. Initially, when Eva presented the PhD students' preliminary research ideas to the MaxART consortium, one of the consortium partners felt that the PhD students shouldn't pick topics based on their own research interests (which is encouraged in the Master's programme they were embedded in) but that they should be instrumental to the MaxART project. This required a flexible attitude from both the PhD students and MaxART consortium members, but it worked out in the end since all three researchers from Swaziland were granted a 4th year to write up their research findings into a PhD dissertation by the University of Amsterdam and are almost finishing their PhD projects. An advantage of this university-NGO collaboration was that academic research could serve as a reality check for the programme implementers and at the same time this type of applied research was also a reality check for academia. For the PhD researchers it creates a lot of extra work and skills having to answer to both global health organisations and the University. The PhD students had to share their findings with the team regularly, but they were not

always able to share new insights in each stage of the research cycle. At the same time, it was not always easy for practitioners to adapt their programmes based on the research findings, for instance, because M&E tools had already been designed.

Reflection from Ria Reis, supervisor UvA:

Ria indicates that UvA students have collaborated with many local NGOs for their individual research projects over the years, and that this has often been complex. In this particular project, her experiences are different compared to all other projects she was involved in because the students' projects formed part of a broader collaboration between the UvA and the NGO, and the first was involved in the project from the phase of design. In the start-up phase, possible areas of conflict were explicitly discussed and described, including ownership of data and publication strategies. It can be difficult when a researcher or supervisor is also coordinating the project, having to balance an insider's commitment with an outsider's critical perspective. Such tensions can lead to irritations but can also offer many things to learn from. For local PhDs it can be difficult to be openly critical about the subject under investigation: the relationships they make are for the rest of their career, we have to be careful about that. UvA is happy that STOP AIDS NOW! understands the university's academic issues, such as those relating to ownership of data and intellectual property rights which enables them to publish in academic journals.

2.2.3   Pitch Simavi-VU

Pitch by Karine Balyan, Simavi:

SRHR is one of Simavi's two core areas. Based on Simavi's research interests, they asked Annabel to conduct a study on menstrual hygiene management. Annabel studied this topic first in Ghana and later in Indonesia. In Ghana it was difficult for Annabel to conduct her research because there was no budget to support her, and she encountered challenges in logistics and communication. Based on their experiences in Ghana, Simavi made a Terms of Reference for Annabel's fieldwork in Indonesia and made sure that Annabel received more supervision from Simavi. The findings from Annabel's research have led Simavi to set up a new programme on menstrual hygiene management in Indonesia.

Reflection from Annabel Buzink, Master's student VU:

Conducting her Master's research in collaboration with Simavi provided Annabel the opportunity to do something for her participants and to contribute to improvement of their lives. Simavi helped her to link up with key informants and gave her information about the local cultures. She experienced the differences between the

academic and the NGO way of thinking as challenging: she had many supervisors, such as a daily supervisor, a local supervisor, and an NGO supervisor, and she found it difficult to mingle between what all these people wanted and to make them all happy.

2.3 Plenary discussion

Each participant was asked to formulate 1-2 points for discussion based on the draft protocol that was shared with them prior to the meeting (see Annex 2. Terms of Reference (ToR)/Guidelines). The plenary discussion centred on the following themes:

Type of collaboration

There are different ways of looking at student-NGO collaborations: there can be a partnership at the student-NGO level or at the university-NGO level with the student collaboration being just one element of that collaboration. NGOs should be able to know where to find supervisors and to communicate with the supervisors what they expect from students and the collaboration.

NGOs receive many requests from Master's students for internships and may adapt the internship assignment to fit the student's interests. In other instances, research assignments may already be fixed, such as in the case of:

- the MaxART project, where building capacity of local researchers was the starting point of the project
- Oxfam Novib Academy, who creates vacancies for internships based on the research needs in their organisation. Students can apply for these vacancies.

Advantages of student-NGO collaborations

Participants feel that student-NGO collaborations have advantages for all actors involved. For students, it is an advantage to get a sense of the working field, e.g. learning to work programmatically and working in an institution; to network; and to learn about working in other cultures. This builds their capacities. For NGOs, it can be a cost-effective way of outsourcing research.

A new type of knowledge

Student-NGO collaborations are not just about internships, it is about producing a new kind of knowledge that the NGO is interested in, which is going to be produced in a process of working together. What kind of knowledge are we looking for? Institutions need to get together and talk this through, this should not just be individual processes.

This creation of a new type of knowledge should be acknowledged, e.g. grading of the Master's thesis should not merely focus on the academic output, and it should be discussed what needs to be changed in order to facilitate the creation of this new type of knowledge. This discussion will be relevant for both the university and the NGO.

Self-reflection

In student-NGO collaborations, students wear two heads: it is an interesting exercise to see what it does to their identity: they need to negotiate their position or develop a new lens. As a researcher, they are trained to be critical, yet in internships and field work they become an influencer of the process. In this exercise, new knowledge is created.

Output

Universities should start a discussion about how they evaluate researchers: they should not only be evaluated on their academic production but also on their societal impact. This would mean that Master programmes should not only grade students' internships based on their academic output but also on the societal impact of their work.

Challenges of student-NGO collaborations

The main challenge of these collaborations revolves around the different research demands of academia and NGOs and the student in the middle having to navigate these demands. There are several supervisors involved and the student needs to attend to all of them.

Students' capacities

A problem with working with students is that they have not yet proven themselves; an internship is a learning experience for them. An NGO and supervisor cannot know beforehand what they can expect from the student. Supervisors want to help develop that student's capacities to the full, but some NGOs seem to expect students to be professionals. Yet, their quality can be less: if you hire a student, this can be at low costs, but you need to be aware that you are hiring students who are still developing their research skills.

Communication

It is important for all parties to be clear about expectations from the beginning and to communicate well. This communication should go between the university and the NGO, not via the student because that puts too much pressure on the student. It may take time for the university and NGO to learn each other's agenda and to run collaborations smoothly.

Student-NGO collaborations: a win-win situation

Both the university and NGO should discuss the ethics of being true to students in their career path and of not making their Master's thesis too demanding. The university and NGO should create a safe environment for the student and ensure that the student will not be exploited in this collaboration.

Timing

Each university and Master's programme has their own schedule: internship calls should be adjusted to those schedules to make sure students can find an internship in time and finish their research in time. It could be helpful to create an overview of relevant Master's programmes, including their schedules, types of programme, and student availability. This overview could be part of a platform created by the Share-Net Netherlands working group 'Linking research, policy and practice' that communicates the supply and demand of students and NGO internships.

Challenges of linking research and practice in general

Sometimes the challenge is not even about student-NGO collaborations but about collaborations between various fields in general. For instance, in the MaxART project, there are various research disciplines, politicians and people with business backgrounds involved. In such collaborations, it can be questioned what research is and how you do it, what you can say and how you can say it. It can be difficult for researchers to publish sensitive research findings, especially when local researchers are involved.

Terms of Reference/guidelines for student-NGO collaborations

Checklist

Student-NGO and university-NGO collaborations cannot be generalized. Students come from different Master programmes with different end terms, timing and sometimes local NGOs are involved as well. Therefore, the protocol to streamline communication should not be in the form of a standardized Terms of Reference, which is too narrow and does not fit all scenarios, but it should rather be a topic/checklist[3], which can be used by all parties involved to check whether they have discussed and agreed on all issues. The checklist could include questions for each domain: you go through them and discuss whether it's applicable for the type of work you are going to do and agree on your position. The checklist could include references for more information.

Expectations

It is important to have clarity about each other's expectations and to lay these down in the guidelines.

Output

The expected output of student-NGO collaborations should be negotiated between the various parties involved and laid down in set of guidelines.

- The output should be negotiated, there should be minimum guidelines about what the NGO and university can expect from a Master or PhD student; they should not have to negotiate time to work on their research due to all the work they are doing for an NGO. Universities usually have minimum requirements of what students need to do to pass and usually students are only graded for their academic output.
- The output is a new type of knowledge resulting from a process of researchers and practitioners working together. Guidelines can help to make clear what this kind of knowledge should entail.
- Oxfam Novib's experience is that it is difficult for a student to write one product that will satisfy both the NGO and the university. Therefore, they are clear at the beginning that the student will need to deliver two products: the Master's thesis and a report for Oxfam Novib. The student needs to be willing to do that.

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[3] As example for creating such a checklist, the ethical guidelines used by AISSR could be used.

- In the process of the student-NGO collaboration, supervisors may change at the NGO or at the university, this should not be of influence to the student's project. A terms of reference can help to ensure the continuity of the research and quality of the supervision throughout the whole process.

2.4 Conclusion and follow-up

Three promising practices were shared. They discussed different types of collaborations: the promising practices of Oxfam Novib Academy and Simavi discussed short-term collaborations with Master's students, whereas the UvA-STOP AIDS NOW! collaboration is a long-term university-NGO collaboration, whereby the PhD students form elements of this bigger collaboration. The Oxfam Novib Academy offers a biannual structured internship programme for a badge of students starting at the same time. The students in this programme have applied to vacancies. Simavi offers more ad-hoc internships based on their research needs and showed how they have adapted their programmes based on the student's research findings.

Student-NGO collaborations offer the opportunity to create a new type of knowledge: discussions between the parties should help to define what this kind of knowledge could entail and what this means for the student's output. Universities should initiate an internal discussion to ensure that student internships are not only rewarded for the academic output but for the societal impact as well.

A student-NGO collaboration should be a win-win situation for all parties involved and none of them should feel exploited. It is important that the university and NGO make clear agreements about what is expected of the student: in terms of internship activities and the research output. It should not be solely up to the student to balance the expectations of the various supervisors.

At least three parties are involved in student-NGO collaborations: the university/supervisor; the student; the NGO; and in the case of field work, a partner NGO. Regular communication and clear agreements are important preconditions for successful student-NGO collaborations. These agreements should be laid down in a Terms of Reference. It was concluded that student-NGO collaborations cannot be generalized and that the protocol to streamline communication should not be in the form of a standardized Terms of Reference because this is too narrow and does not fit all scenarios. Rather, it should be a topic/checklist, which can be used by all parties involved to check whether they have discussed and agreed on all issues.

It was suggested that it would be helpful if Share-Net Netherlands could create a platform that communicates the supply and demand of students and NGO internships. This could include an overview of relevant Master's programmes, including their schedules, types of programme, and student availability.

2.4.1   Follow-up

- The Share-Net Netherlands working group 'Linking research, policy and practice' will work on a topic/checklist to be used in student-NGO collaborations based on the draft Terms of Reference (see Annex 2. Terms of Reference (ToR)/Guidelines) and suggestions put forward during the round table discussion. Based on their experiences with student-NGO collaborations, the round table participants will be asked for their input in the development of this checklist.
- The Share-Net Netherlands working group 'Linking research, policy and practice' will discuss the possibilities of creating and supporting a platform that communicates the supply and demand of students and NGO internships, including the creation of an overview of relevant Master's programmes, including their schedules, types of programme, and student availability.

Annex 1. List of participants

No.	Name	Last name	Organisation	Email
1	Karine	Balyan	Simavi	Karine.Balyan@simavi.nl
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16	Eva	Vernooij	UvA	e.e.vernooij@uva.nl

Annex 2. Terms of Reference (ToR)/Guidelines[4]

To be used by NGOs and universities to structure/streamline communication between them in relation to student research assignments/internships.

1. Front page:
- Title; name researcher/student, academic supervisor, NGO/implementing NGO supervisor/coach; date

2. Introduction
- Introduction to the topic/assignment
- Research questions/objectives of the research
- Research methodology
- Objectives of [internship/student-NGO collaboration], taking into account:
  - **Expectations** and **personal and professional growth** of student/researcher and NGO/educational institute/implementing NGO supervisors, e.g.
    - This internship is a success, when ….
    - My personal learning objective is … [e.g. coaching and mentoring skills].
    - What I expect from [the student/my supervisors], is ….
    - What [the student/my supervisors] can expect from me, is …..;
  - Strengthening linkage between research, policy and practice.

3. Expected output
- E.g. **presentation** of findings by researcher for [NGO]. This product is expected to be delivered [after completion of the Master thesis at [name educational institute]]. The student retains full copyright to this material.
- E.g. a courtesy copy of the **final thesis** paper. This product is expected to be delivered [date/after completion and approval of the Master thesis at [name educational institute]]. The student retains full copyright to this material.
- E.g. a **lessons learned technical brief** based on the research findings. After finishing the research, the researcher and NGO will collaboratively develop a technical brief in [language], including recommendations for policy and practice. This product is expected to be delivered [date]. The technical brief will consist of [number of pages] and be created according to [NGO] standards.

4. Collaboration and division of tasks

This is a collaboration between [NGO] and [educational institute]. The involved partners are [e.g. implementing NGO where research will be conducted]. We agree upon the following division of responsibilities:

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[4] N.B. This draft protocol is based on input provided by Aids Fonds, Educaids and Oxfam Novib Academy

- The internship **agreement** starts on [date] and ends on [date]. The student/researcher works on the basis of [hours per week]. [Student/researcher] is present at the [NGO/implementing NGO] office on [weekly days].
- The student/researcher will adhere to the [NGO/implementing NGO] ethical **code of conduct**, including confidentiality of research participants.

4.1 Guidance and support

- The student/researcher will be allowed to **participate** in [NGO/implementing NGO] meetings and activities considered relevant for the research or contributing to the internship objectives.
- The [educational institute] provides the student/researcher methodological **support and guidance** concerning research procedures. The educational institute is **responsible** for the final qualification of the research, taking into consideration the inputs delivered by [NGO] and its implementing partner.
- A [NGO] and [implementing NGO] coach, which will be [name] and [name], will be assigned to provide [**supportive assistance/on-site supervision**] to the student/researcher. The [supportive assistance/on-site supervision] to the student/researcher will consist of [hours per week].
- [implementing NGO] will identify a **local point of contact** responsible for immediate details of the research project and will provide a **working space** at [implementing NGO] to the student/researcher and will –when requested- strive to facilitate **access** of the researcher to participants for data collection.
- [NGO] provides the student/researcher with an **internship fee** of [Euros] per month for the duration of [number of months] and **reimburses** [e.g. international travel and living expenses].
- **Interim evaluations** and a **feedback session** will take place [date/after completion of (see planning)] between [educational institute supervisor], [student], [coach NGO] and [coach implementing NGO] to address the objectives of the research and internship.

4.2 Research

- [NGO] requests the deliverables within the framework of [project]. The data collected within the framework of the ToR is **property** of the [student/researcher], [educational institute], [NGO] and [implementing NGO].
- The products expected in this ToR will be **developed** by [student/researcher] and according to this ToR signed with [NGO] and [implementing NGO].
- In publications, the student/researcher will **acknowledge** all relevant partners who have contributed to the work being published.
- [NGO] coordinates the **linkage** between the local programme needs and the larger programme priorities.

5. Planning

Period	Activity
……..	Development of research proposal
	Data collection
	Data analysis
	……

In agreement,

…………………………………………..   …………………………………………..
Signature [student/researcher]   Signature [NGO]

…………………………………………..   …………………………………………..
Signature [educational institute/supervisor]   Signature [implementing NGO]

Annexes

Annex 3. Presentation Oxfam Novib Academy