

North West Science Alliance: collaborating regionally for local delivery

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Parallel Workshop at the Science Communication Conference

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The North West Science Alliance (NWSA) was recently established to bring together the many organizations in the region who work to raise the profile of science. The workshop highlighted NWSA as a collaborative model and provided opportunities for regionally based organisations, or organisations with regional structures to discuss the aims of regional collaboration, how to bring people together, who to involve and when, the advantages and possible pitfalls, and case studies of successful outcomes.

Approximately 25 people attended the workshop and through group work and open discussion the potential advantages and problems of establishing a similar network were explored.

Background

The NWSA began with the realisation that there was an overlap between the aims and outputs of a number of organisations in the area. Exploratory telephone calls revealed that there was a much wider and more diverse range of organisations and skills than was first thought and the NWSA now has over fifty organisational members.

It was emphasized that although difficult to start, this alliance quickly became a self-perpetuating activity with each phone call leading to more and more possible contacts. Lorelly Wilson suggested that what had been achieved in the North West was possible anywhere in the UK.

Perceived Advantages of Establishing a Network

Shared Resources

It was agreed that membership of such a network would allow sharing of experience, expertise and knowledge, as well as contacts, audiences, resources, venues and understanding of the geographical area. The opportunity for all members to have access to this pool of knowledge and resources was considered to be a great advantage. Discovering members' hidden skills was also cited as a benefit. Over 50 organisations are now represented, but there are other groups who are still to be contacted. The alliance hopes to continue to expand in the future.

Awareness Potential

All agreed that working together could encourage an increased awareness of the constituent organisations and their activities. This could be achieved partly by sharing contacts as well as by joining forces to put on larger, more noticeable events. The NWSA is now of sufficiently high profile to be consulted by outside bodies on a range of issues. There were reservations concerning the focus of this attention (see below).

Support

It was proposed that the mutual support and reassurance provided by a larger network was an important benefit. The NWSA has energized its members, and inspired them to carry on their work, including the resurrection of a moribund learned society.

Potential Pitfalls and Concerns of Establishing a Network

During the discussion a number of potential pitfalls and concerns were identified and suggestions for managing and overcoming them were put forward. These are dealt with in turn below.

Is the North West a special case?

The issue was raised concerning whether the success of NWSA was due to the particular circumstances of science in the northwest, which has recently undergone many changes following the DIAMOND decision. There was concern over the network's transferability to other regions. It is not believed that the NWSA has benefited directly from this situation but the NWSA has not made a conscious effort to research this issue.

Geographical Rivalry

The NWSA was aware of the long standing rivalry between Liverpool and Manchester. In practice, however, this has not caused problems. It was suggested that many networks of different sizes (e.g. town, county and region) would be counter-productive as they would compete for the same members. However it was generally felt that there was strength in flexibility and that membership of several networks could be beneficial. It was believed that organisations that were not already involved in networking would welcome the opportunity to be involved with a variety of other organisations, and that those who were already involved in networking would wish to take advantage of the system whilst still expanding in their own particular areas.

Initial Resistance

There was concern that there would be initial resistance to the establishment of a network. People might worry that it would create extra work for them. It was suggested that going ahead and doing something (even small scale) as an example of what can be done could encourage people to consider how they could do better and get involved themselves. It was felt that the process of establishing a network could be disheartening if confronted by such resistance. A central committee was suggested as a way of providing mutual support.

External Perception

It is important that everyone recognises that the network is inclusive, discouraging rivalry and not in any sense competing with other groups in the region. There was a general consensus that, provided the network was and could be seen to be beneficial to the region, this should be of little concern.

Uneven contributions from member organisations

Many people felt that not all members would contribute equally to the network and that some organisations could end up "carrying" others. There was a general feeling that this was often the case in collaborative ventures and there was concern that by being involved in the establishment of the network there was a danger of becoming the mainstay of any future ventures. Lorelly Wilson

confirmed that different organisations interact with the NWSA in different ways but pointed out that ultimately you can only get out what is put into a network.

Differing agendas from member organisations

Concerns were raised over the potential of organisations with conflicting agendas creating tension within the network. Lorelly Wilson confirmed that, although the NWSA has a very diverse set of member organisations, no such difficulties have arisen.

External pressures

The NWSA is seen as a major player in the region and many outside organisations see the value of consulting with the network. Was there a risk of putting pressure on the network? It was generally perceived as a measure of success for outside organisations to approach the network; however there was concern that credibility would need to be maintained by not bowing to external pressures to produce particular results for consultation. The steering committee is important to maintain impartiality.

What does membership mean?

The nature of any network is defined by what constitutes membership. Lorelly outlined the NWSA's long term plan which included having a steering group with a clear vision of purpose and having members attending regular meetings. It was agreed that the meaning of membership would depend on the individual nature of each network.

How do you measure success?

It was suggested that it would be difficult to measure the success of a network. It would have to be decided with regard to the objectives which would evolve according to the needs of the member organisations. Lorelly Wilson showed a list of NWSA achievements so far. These achievements record the growing influence of the alliance. However, concerns were raised as to whether any new audiences were reached through the network's activities/events or whether they were simply catering to existing audiences. Lorelly conceded that at present there was no information on the level of impact of the many separate member organisations before the alliance. However it is hoped that the evaluation of the alliance's first major joint event (Science on Sunday to be held in Manchester on September 7th) will indicate whether or not new audiences are being brought in through the collaboration.

How to keep the momentum going

The current issue for the NWSA is how to keep the momentum going now that the network is up and running. Several areas were put forward for consideration including frequency of meetings, content of meetings and relationships with external groups. There was a feeling that these issues would be radically different for each alliance.

Summary

The establishment of the North West Science Alliance was seen as a very positive development. It has already achieved a great deal for the region. People were generally keen to have similar networks in their own areas but, as always, resourcing is an issue.

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