



UNIVERSITY  
ACTION LAB

France

## Good Practice Case Study

Sciences Po

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## PROJECT PARTNERS



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## GENERAL INFORMATION

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**Title of the case**      Projet collectif (Group project), Masters of Regional and Urban Strategy (Stratégies territoriales et urbaines, STU)

**Sales pitch**              Training for urban governance in France and Europe

**Organisations**          Urban School, Sciences Po University

**Country**                  France

**Authors**                  Fernando Fernandez

**Nature of interaction**      Collaborative project in real life scenarios

**Level of mechanism**

- ☐ Government policy (e.g. law, funding framework)
- ☐ Organisational strategy (e.g. university/business/agency)
- ☐ Structural element (e.g. centre, lab, office)
- ☒ Operational level (e.g. activity or programme)

Length of programme	9 months	Formality	Informal

Curricula-bound, co or extra-curricular?	Curricula	Level of initiative	Cross-disciplinary

**Summary**                  The Masters of Regional and Urban Strategy (Stratégies territoriales et urbaines, STU) prepares students for professional practice in the field of urban policy and governance. A key component of year 1 is the module 'Projet collectif', in which students are exposed to real life scenarios. Commissioned and supervised by government bodies at local and regional levels, the selection of relevant topics encourages students to understand the complexity of current urban issues.

The module runs from October until June and provides an opportunity for students to engage with a variety of stakeholders in order to develop suitable proposals. Topics focus on the implementation of sustainability principles, public participation and social cohesion in order to complement the theoretical content of the Masters programme.



## CASE STUDY PROFILE

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### BACKGROUND

Sciences Po has built its reputation on the education of world class politics and administrative leaders. Since its foundation in 1872, its focus on developing a renovated model of governance has helped shape the modern political structure in France and the rest of Europe (1).

The evolution of its structure saw the expansion of disciplines through the 20th century, culminating with an extensive reform of the organization during the 1990s. This included the opening of regional campuses, strengthening the role of Sciences Po as leader in the formation of public governors and the regeneration of public life (2). In the case of urban studies, different iterations of the faculty ended with the establishment of the Urban School in 2015.

The political and administrative component of Sciences Po's educational framework has always relied on strong collaboration with public bodies. A variety of formative programmes helped the HEI establish itself as an innovative institution that provides high quality leaders for France's public life.

### CONTEXT

The STU Masters programme is a combination of theoretical background and exposure to professional practice. The group project module exemplifies a plurality of inputs while challenging students to complete a research project that fulfils not only the academic requirements of their course, but also the expectations of professional practitioners.

The module was established in 2003. Different iterations of its structure allowed for a framework that successfully integrated into the rest of the educational programme while highlighting the importance of the practical component for the completion of the course. It focuses on the empowerment of students to drive their investigation with a basic supervision by academic leaders.

By placing the module in year 1 of the Masters programme, the faculty capitalizes on the variety of backgrounds of students, some of whom have no previous experience in the realm of urban

studies. This reflects the multidisciplinary nature of urban governance and public life, highlighting the need for future practitioners to embrace their role of mediators and negotiators amongst stakeholders with very different priorities.

## OBJECTIVES AND MOTIVATIONS

- To expose students to the reality of professional practice and identify the challenges when adapting theoretical knowledge to real life scenarios.
- To identify how new approaches offered by current students can inform municipalities to strengthen their governance function.
- To accelerate the implementation of sustainability principles to local and regional governance.
- To enhance the educational quality of the Masters programme with an immersive co-creative project.
- To capitalize on the variety of backgrounds offered by students, reflecting the complexity of practice in urbanism and enhancing their groupwork capabilities.

## STAKEHOLDERS

**Local and regional authorities:** they engage in all stages of the project from the selection of a relevant issue to workshops and creative activities throughout the academic year. Members of public bodies can also play an advisory role to specific groups. Examples of entities that have been involved in the project in recent years are Établissement Public Territorial du Grand-Orly Seine Bièvre (government of an intercommunal structure located to the South of Paris) or France Urbaine (association of cities and urban communities).

**Sciences Po University:** the institution facilitates the development of the project and accommodates the requirements of the activities within the curriculum and timetable. Academics supervise the different stages and encourage students to gain exposure to a variety of scenarios.

**Students:** registered in their first year of the STU Masters studies, they carry the majority of the workload throughout the project and they have the ability to select approaches and propose alternatives to the main question.

**Local community:** their stake can be represented by governance bodies or executed through direct participation in community engagement exercises. Depending on the nature of the topic, some groups are encouraged to arrange public participation events.

## PROCESS

### INPUT

Financially, the project relies on the institution providing the challenge. Sponsors (mainly local and regional authorities) deliver funding that assists in the completion of all student activities, including research methods, field trips, and external enquiries. The size of these expenditures depends on the nature of the proposed activities and the requirements of the topic.

The university is heavily invested in the organization of the project. The provision of physical spaces for students to work together and to meet the experts is accompanied by the use of licenced software, hardware, and datasets that contribute to the professionalization of the challenge.

Groups are formed by 4 students, allocated by the course coordinator to specific topics.

With regards to human resources, projects are supervised by a practitioner or academic with expertise in the field. In addition to this, groups are supported by:

- Universities: providing a coordinator within the Urban School, as well as the leader for the specific module.
- Local/regional authority: the institution facilitates contact between student groups and the members of the organization that can assist in the development of their project. These are usually distributed across the agency and are available for students to gain insight on their progress and lines of investigation.

### ACTIVITIES

The group project runs between October and June and is recognized with 10 credits. Before the beginning of the course, the organizations proposing challenges contact the lead academic with their topic of interest for the year. Last year, issues were brought forward by Établissement Public Territorial du Grand-Orly Seine Bièvre (government of an intercommunal structure located to the South of Paris) or France Urbaine (association of cities and urban communities). A third project was managed by energy provider EDF, which is largely owned by the French state.

After being received by the Urban School, ideas are brought in for internal evaluation and the accepted topics are adapted to the teaching schedule and student workload. The three topics treated during the 2018-2019 year were:

- Use of numerical data for the optimization of urban regeneration projects
- Change of dynamics for municipalities and regions within the renewable energy markets through the use of urban policy
- State of public participation in medium-to-large sized settlements

Once the topic is selected, a mentor is chosen to overview each of the projects. This individual can be a representative of the university, industry, or municipality and the selection is based on their area of expertise and the proposed methodologies.

At the beginning of their first year of the Masters course, students are divided in groups of 4 and allocated to a specific topic based on their personal interest. All students belong to the same programme, but their background in undergraduate studies is diverse. The project starts with a briefing session where the commissioning organization introduces their client brief, requirements for research, and deliverables.

After the briefing, each group dedicates one and a half days per week to the development of their line of investigation, collection, and analysis of data, and the definition of proposals. To achieve this, the timetable is cleared from Thursday afternoon (3). These sessions are supervised by their academic supervisor and with occasional participation by the project mentor.

As well as the scheduled sessions, which are predefined in the course timetable, student groups are expected to allocate extra time for the completion of their research. This includes the arrangement of interviews with specialist practitioners, communication with stakeholders, field trips for data collection and observation, and assessment sessions with members of the municipality.

Through the different stages of the process, the organization that sponsors the project welcomes students to enquire about the progress of their investigation. Periodic updates are provided via sessions with their mentor, who provides guidance and suggests potential adjustments to ensure the relevance of the project.

At the end of the second semester, students produce an extensive report that summarises their findings, research methodology, and proposals. In addition to this, groups make a public presentation of their concept.



## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

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### OUTPUTS

The main body of work is the final report completed by each student group. The design combines the traditional research structure with guidance and methodology suggested by representatives of the municipality and other practitioners.

The final documents follow the technical requirements of professional practice. The production of mapping, registering of testimonies, recording of public engagement sessions, and development of benchmarks are completed following the standards set by practitioners. The report should include detailed information on their research method, study protocol, and technical annexes.

Groups can also present their findings in the form of audiovisual content, public presentations, exhibitions, or field study visits.

## IMPACTS

The following impacts have been observed:

- **Urban School, Sciences Po:** by facilitating the delivery of the group project, academics find a more robust connection between the theoretical background explained during the course and the reality of professional practice. The topics that are proposed help them shape the content of their lectures, enhancing the relevance of the programme.

- **Students:** the participation in group projects equips students with a set of soft skills that will facilitate their transition into their professional career. These skills are extremely valuable in the context of urban sciences, including the execution of community engagement campaigns, identification of societal challenges, and negotiation with stakeholders of great ranges of inequality.

They also increase their technical capabilities in the use of professional software, such as Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and statistical analysis. This depends on the nature of the project and the briefing given by the commissioner, but it can be a positive complement to the content of methodological workshops that are included as part of the STU Masters programme.

The completion of the group project, with constant communication between students and practitioners, creates potential employment opportunities for postgraduates.

- **Local authorities:** deliverables from the group project are received and assessed by governing bodies. The standard that is promoted through the creative process results in a high-quality document that can inform future lines of investigation for municipalities.

Also, the strong awareness shown by students with regards to sustainability and clean energy offers a new dimension for the municipality with up to date information and relevant use of the available data. This can develop into potential recruitment considerations to strengthen the capabilities of the department.

The significance of the selected topics, usually linked to challenges for future development within the region, makes the student projects relevant for the local authority from a strategic standpoint. Innovative ideas and research paths can instigate a conversation within the government agencies to implement change within their structure or to consider the allocation of resources to pursue solutions that were explored by student groups.



### SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

The completion of group projects by Masters students is supported by the academic structure of the STU course. Teaching schedule, facilities, and credits are fully integrated within the sessions. The selection of topics and the adequacy to the university curriculum requires of a flexibility by the teaching staff, which is fully supported by the faculty.

In addition to this, the long-lasting collaboration between Sciences Po and governing bodies allows for a more fluid communication that generates suitable topics to be proposed. Having taken place since 2003, group projects are recognized by municipalities as a desirable contribution by students. This leadership within the region attracts private organizations, such as EDF (4), to participate in the projects, increasing the capacity of the initiative.

### BARRIERS AND DRIVERS

There are two main barriers that hinder the smooth delivery of group projects:

- **Funding:** the increasing complexity of projects in recent years create a larger financial burden that can be difficult to provide for organizations. This is particularly accurate in the case of municipalities and other public bodies where the allocation of resources is subject to strict scrutiny.
- **Collaboration agreement:** with the selection of topics being based on proposals by sponsors, there is a large amount of negotiation between academic leaders of the course and representatives of those organizations. Traditionally, topics were brought forward in September with a decision and the necessary adjustments being made by October. However, this is considered to constrain both the faculty and the municipality.



## LESSONS LEARNED

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### CHALLENGES

There are two main challenges for the group projects moving forward:

- **Establishing new partnerships with external stakeholders:** in order to guarantee the reputation and quality of the course, Sciences Po acknowledges the need to set new collaboration agreements with new institutions. This would mitigate the potential shortage of funding from commissioners and increase the recognition of the Masters course within the urban practitioners network. Traditionally linked to public institutions, the possibility to collaborate with private organizations exists, proving their interests align with those of the local community and governance objectives.

- **Selecting topics that are relevant for the content of the course, as well as professional practice:** the increasing complexity of societal challenges and the pressure that municipalities face from an economic, social, and environmental perspective, creates the need for group projects to remain relevant, allowing students to assess issues that will make a positive impact when they join businesses and local authorities.

## KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

The well-established partnership between Sciences Po and local government agencies has created a culture of nurturing from the authorities and a sense of responsibility towards the training of future professionals. This collaborative ethos is a product of the mutual trust between organizations and fluid communication that allows municipalities to have a real input in the development of cases.

The success of the project is also closely related to its funding structure. Unlike other student-practice collaboration projects, STU groups demand a financial commitment from the organization. Despite the possibility of becoming a barrier for the attraction of new partners, this requirement guarantees the quality of input and engagement by municipalities and public bodies. Representatives of governance are always available for students to contact and are heavily invested in the production of high quality outputs.

The close communication between the Urban School and government bodies allows for a consistent flow of feedback with regards to the content and quality of the group projects. The evaluation of the module is based on the combination of feedback from specialist practitioners and the academic assessment by the module leaders. This informs the final grades and the acquisition of the associated credits.

Due to the strong relationship between Sciences Po and public bodies, the completion of group projects enjoys a consistent demand for topics to be addressed. There is strong support from university management, appreciating the exposure and quality of the learning experience.

The outsourcing of finance has been identified as a potential compromise for the continuity of the project and alternative funding might be considered.



## FURTHER INFORMATION

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### AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

NA

### TRANSFERABILITY

There are other universities replicating the structure of the group project for their urban studies courses. Despite its basic framework, the success of the project requires the accumulation of an extensive network of practitioners and collaborators.

A potential challenge for the exact replication of the STU model is the need to adapt the requirements of the module to the local and regional context. The methodology is considered transferrable, but the relevance of the module relies on the reflection of economic, social, and political circumstances that will affect professional practice and the way governance is executed.

### PUBLICATIONS

Samples of deliverables for group projects can be found in the following links (only available in French):

Opportunities for cities during energy transition (2019): [https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/sites/sciencespo.fr.ecole-urbaine/files/Synth%c3%a8seV2\\_La-mont%c3%a9e-en-puissance-des-territoires-sur-le-march%c3%a9-de-l%27%c3%a9lectricit%c3%a9-2.pdf](https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/sites/sciencespo.fr.ecole-urbaine/files/Synth%c3%a8seV2_La-mont%c3%a9e-en-puissance-des-territoires-sur-le-march%c3%a9-de-l%27%c3%a9lectricit%c3%a9-2.pdf)

Digital data for urban renewal (2019): [https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/sites/sciencespo.fr.ecole-urbaine/files/projetco\\_Donn%c3%a9es-Renouvellement-Urbain\\_Rendu-final\\_version-web-finale.pdf](https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/sites/sciencespo.fr.ecole-urbaine/files/projetco_Donn%c3%a9es-Renouvellement-Urbain_Rendu-final_version-web-finale.pdf)

Citizen participation in large settlements (2019): <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/sites/sciencespo.fr.ecole-urbaine/files/Rapport%20final%20-%20La%20participation%20citoyenne%20dans%20les%20grandes%20villes%2c%20grandes%20intercommunalit%c3%a9s%20et%20m%c3%a9tropoles-2.pdf>

### LINKS

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/en/stu/group-projects.html>

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## RESOURCES

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- 2) Meerman A. (2016), University of Twente: The entrepreneurial university of the Netherlands through hi-tech and human touch. (Case study for the University-Business Cooperation project) Available from: <https://www.ub-cooperation.eu/index/casestudies>
- 3) Benneworth, P., Bakker, I. and Velderman, W.J., 2018. 14. Beyond big data, the open data revolution for research. Knowledge, Policymaking and Learning for European Cities and Regions, p.193.
- 4) 20Creathon. Previous challenges. Available at: <https://20creathon.eu/previous-challenges/>
- 5) Bazen, J. (2018), Analysis of the effects of creative hackathons on participants, challenge providers and the entrepreneurial ecosystem,



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