

**Preparation for the European Commission's White Paper on European
Governance**

***Democratising Expertise and establishing
European Scientific Reference Systems***

**Results of an Internet Questionnaire
(March-May 2001)**

1. Background

The Prodi Commission has made “Promoting new forms of European governance” one of its four strategic priorities. It announced the publication of a White Paper, which would set out recommendations on how to enhance democracy in Europe and increase the legitimacy of the institutions. As part of the preparation of this White Paper, twelve inter-departmental working groups were set up within the Commission. One of these was charged with the topic ‘*Democratising expertise and scientific reference systems*’. This group began its work at the end of 2000, and embarked on a series of hearings, workshops and case studies. As part of this consultation exercise, an internet questionnaire was opened on 5 March. The aim was to reach out for the views of an audience beyond those in immediate contact with the working group.

The initial deadline for replies was 2 April; this was subsequently extended to 15 May. The questionnaire was situated on the CORDIS web site, with links to the home pages DG Research and the Secretariat General. Links were also provided to the work plan for the Commission’s deliberations on governance, and to the mandate of the working group.

The questionnaire itself is given in the annex. This report summarises the results.

2. General remarks

The format of the questionnaire was discussed in detail within the working group. It aimed to provide an opportunity for ‘unconstrained’ answers, within a structured framework of relevant issues identified by the group. Respondents were not required to make an entry under every issue. The survey was not, of course, valid in a statistical sense.

Because the survey was situated on CORDIS a disproportionate number of replies came from those concerned with the EU Framework Programmes. Many replied from the point-of-view of experts in research proposal evaluation.

The overall impression of the results of this exercise is positive. The number of respondents was reasonably large, and, taken as a whole, the results were rich and thought-provoking. A number of respondents welcomed the opportunity to participate in this debate, although some remarked that the questionnaire was tiresome to complete.

3. Basic statistics

The following outlines the profile of the responding population, as captured by the 'objective' questions:

- A total of 246 replies were received. The charts in figures 1 and 2 show the breakdown according to nationality, gender, and organisations type.
- Replies were received from all EU countries (one only from LU, FI and SE), and from seven of the accession countries.
- The four most populated EU countries, plus Belgium (due to the number of Brussels-based interest groups), supplied the five highest rates of response. The number of responses from France was surprisingly low, despite the availability of a French version of the questionnaire.
- The respondents were overwhelmingly male. The sexes only approached parity in the cases of Spain, Portugal, Finland and Bulgaria.
- By far the highest number of responses came from universities. Indeed, when taken together with research organisations, replies from academia accounted for 46% of the total response. Of the academic disciplines represented, 25% were from the humanities and social sciences, 40% from the natural sciences, and 21% from the applied sciences.
- A relatively small proportion (9%) came from government. SMEs were reasonably well represented (14%).
- The vast majority of respondents were either providers of expert advice, or were both providers and receivers. Three respondents were solely receivers of advice.

Fig.1 - Total by Country and Gender

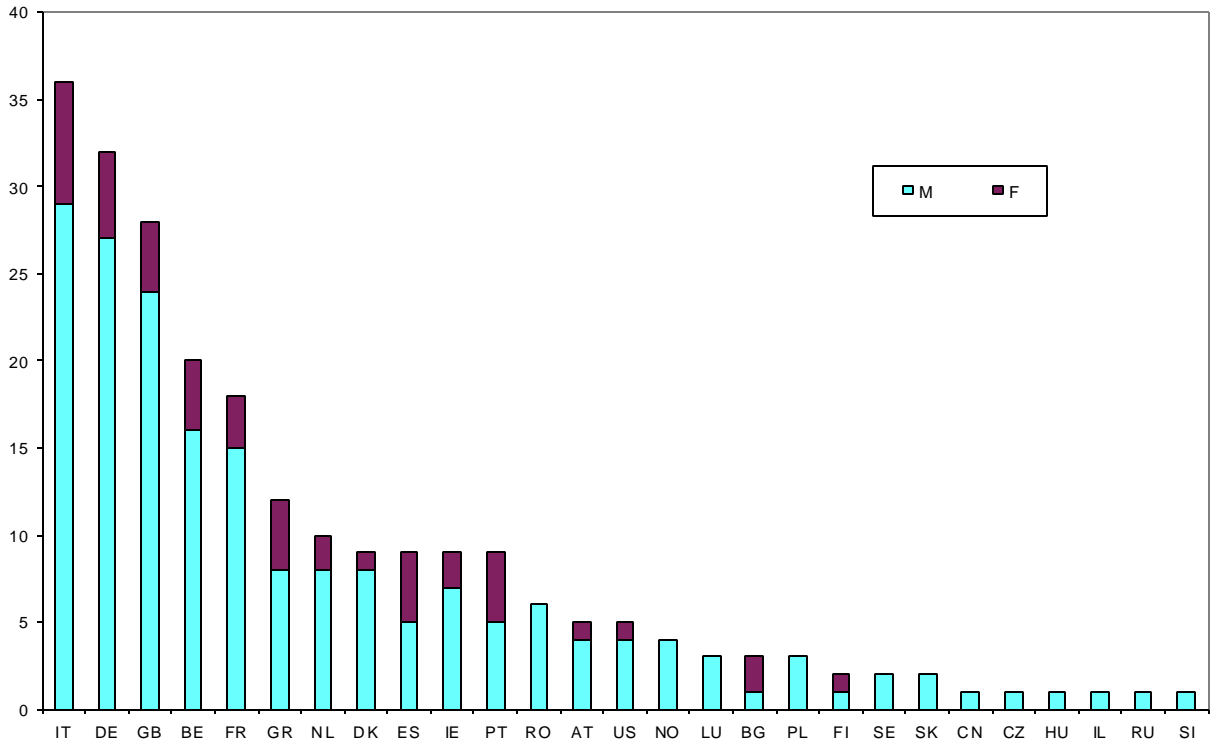
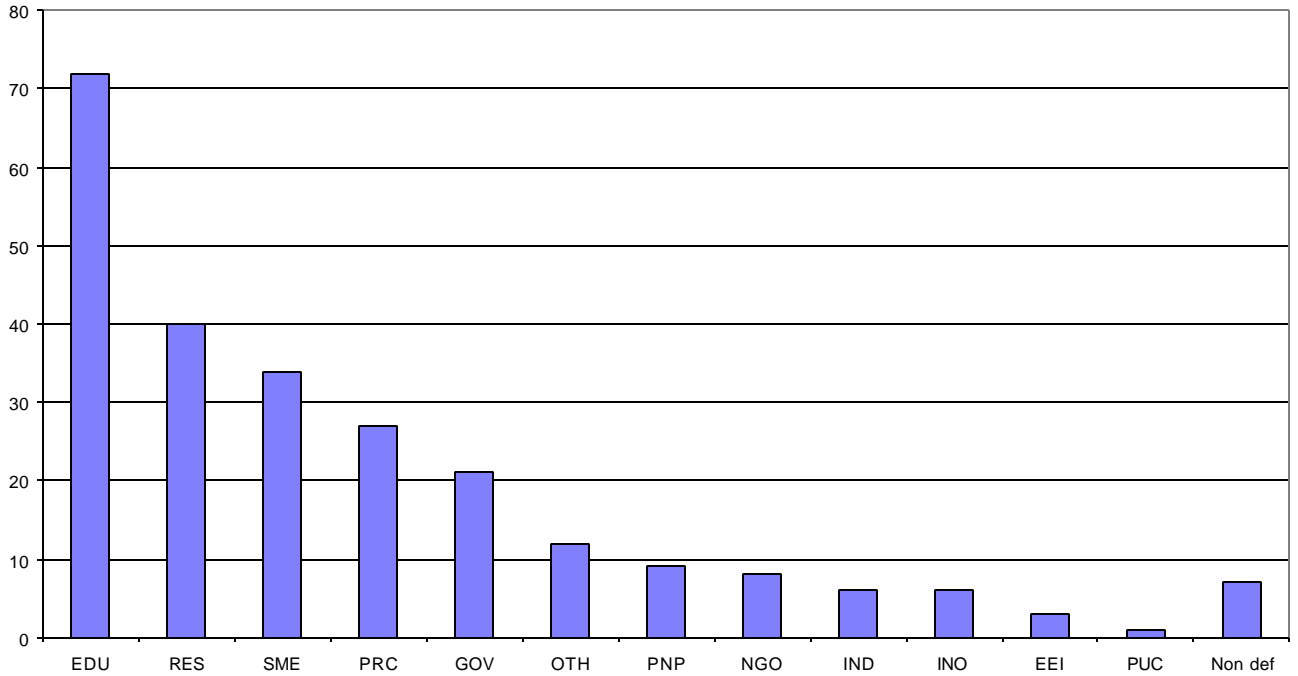


Fig. 2 - Total replies by organisation type



EDU University/Higher Education
 RES Research Organisation
 SME Industry – Small/Medium size Enterprise
 PRC Private Commercial
 GOV Government body
 OTH Others

PNP Public Non Profit
 NGO Non Governmental Organisation
 IND Industry – Big Enterprise
 INO International Organisation
 EEI European Economic Interest Group
 PUC Public Commercial

4. The issues

This section attempts to summarise the main messages coming through from the more subjective issue-based questions. Points addressing each issue have been grouped together, although sometimes they were expressed under different headings.

- **The role of experts in general**

A number of general points were raised. Experts should not be used to justify decisions that have already been made, nor should they be used to solve political problems. The questions put to experts should be clear, and broad-based. The mandate of the expert groups should be clear, and they should be sufficiently well-resourced to carry it out. When policy-makers choose not to follow expert advice, this should be explained. The benefits of interdepartmental guidelines on the use of expertise for policy-making were mentioned.

“There is a public misconception about the credibility of experts in general, but it is in part due to the fact that experts need to recognize the limitations of their expertise.”

- **Timing**

Many respondents insisted that experts should be consulted at the earliest possible stage in policy-making. One pointed out this should be before public opinion has become prejudiced. Nevertheless, two respondents warned against premature delivery of advice since the experts themselves need time to understand the problem at hand, and may need to collect new data and develop ‘knowledge’ to address it.

“Involving experts in an early stage is necessary to clarify where the problems really are. [The process] should be a permanent one - it is necessary to have regular feed-back loops”

A large number of respondents insisted that experts have a role throughout the policy-making cycle. Some emphasised the early warning function of expertise (“horizon scanning”). The possibility was raised of establishing pools of ‘standby experts’ for crisis situations.

- **Type and range**

The need to consult broadly was emphasised by many. Respondents highlighted variously the importance of including a mixture of disciplines, minority views, different schools of thought, practitioners, social as well as natural scientists, women, young experts, local

“A good mix and pleasant surroundings can shorten many time-consuming and irrelevant discussions”

experts, and those alert to ethical aspects. A number of replies argued that the consultation of stakeholders should be quite distinct from the consultation of experts.

Some pointed out the value of the diverse cultures within Europe, and the need to ensure geographical representativeness. However, one respondent pointed out the dangers of “tokenism” in the composition of expert panels.

- **Selection of experts**

A substantial proportion of respondents insisted that only ‘independent’ experts should be consulted, although for some it would be sufficient for experts to declare any possible conflicts of interest. One respondent complained that there is a tendency to only select experts from large consultancies. A number of suggestions were made on who should actually do the selection. These included: democratically legitimated bodies; the concerned stakeholders; joint panel of funders and funded (eg. for award of grants); a computer (select at random from a pool of experts). Some insisted that, in any case, the selection procedure itself should be transparent and subject to scrutiny.

“The goal should be to prevent policy-makers to select experts only to support their prefabricated opinion.”

The manner in which DG Research selects experts for reviewing research proposals (i.e. call for interest, mixed panels, declarations of independence) was cited favourably by a number of respondents, and more critically by a few (e.g. over-reliance on submitted CVs).

- **Information sharing between the experts**

Many did not regard this as a problem, thanks to the normal round of academic conferences and seminars, and the possibility to create virtual communities through the internet. Nevertheless, a number acknowledged the problems of interaction between disciplines, as well as the problem of language.

- **When experts disagree**

It was pointed out that the first priority should be to ensure that the disagreement is real, and not the result of misunderstanding. The role of the chairperson becomes important. In some cases, it may be beneficial to commission further research. Otherwise, disagreement among experts should not necessarily be seen as a problem, but should simply be explained clearly when the advice is handed on to the political level. One respondent suggested that in this case it is more beneficial for to present the debate, rather than the opposing views.

“If all your experts agreed I would be worried”

- **Uncertainty**

This is clearly linked to the previous question. Many agreed that uncertainty is the core issue, and one that it is a difficult concept to convey to politicians and to the public. The important point is to make uncertainty explicit. One suggestion was to bring in statistical experts to ensure that uncertainty is properly quantified.

"No attempt should be made to protect the public from uncertainty".

The key role of the Precautionary Principle was highlighted by some, and the guidelines set out in the Commission's proposal were mentioned (e.g. any decision, based on current, uncertain knowledge should be provisional). A dialogue between the risk assessors and the risk managers was considered beneficial by some, and an anathema to others.

- **Informing the public**

The importance of transparency was widely endorsed (although one respondent queried, possibly ironically, why the public should be interested in matters that they don't understand). The media can play a key role here, although there is currently a tendency to overemphasise maverick views. Some argued that it should be the decision-makers, and not the experts themselves, who should inform the public. Others emphasised the importance of choosing experts capable of communication. Another suggestion was to distribute information via the professional societies.

"Information from experts should be presented to the public at a sufficiently rigorous level to make them feel as though they are getting the full story without blinding them with science."

On communicating risk and uncertainty, one suggestion was to draw analogies (e.g. *"the risk is equivalent to smoking one cigarette in thirty years"*). One respondent remarked that in fact many people gamble, and hence understand probabilities perfectly well.

- **Dialogue between experts and the public**

This was regarded as a very difficult but important process. (One respondent considered it impossible). The virtues of public scrutiny and deliberative procedures such as hearings, round tables, consensus conferences were extolled by many. The Commission and the European Parliament were mentioned as bodies capable of fostering such a dialogue.

- **The media**

The role of the media was generally seen as important but problematic. More than one respondent argued that, generally, the media sensationalise and deliberately distort technical issues. Another queried the assumption that the media 'spoke' for public opinion. It was also

pointed out that the media are themselves stakeholders. One respondent was impressed by the ability of good journalists, when interviewing experts, to cut to the heart of the matter and render it understandable to the public. It was suggested that more journalists should receive science training. Another suggestion was that a very direct form of transparency could be achieved by filming and broadcasting expert debates.

"In crises, the media assumes the role of fervent advocates of a public portrayed as utterly innocent and heavily victimised."

- **Scientific Reference Systems (SRS)**

This concept was generally welcomed, although many felt that it was insufficiently defined to make a judgement. Some considered that SRS could apply to all policy areas, while others explicitly mentioned, variously, food safety, environment, natural hazards, energy, transport, fisheries and information technology. European SRS should link to related structures world-wide. A small number of respondents questioned the need for European SRS at all. Many insisted that SRS should not become overly bureaucratic. A network approach should be applied. One respondent pointed out that the most important aspect is the people in the various institutions making up the networks, not the institutions themselves. The establishment of European SRS should be guided by the principles of plurality, transparency, integrity, independence and ethics. They should be user-oriented.

"I strongly suggest to be careful with such reference systems. They may become bureaucratic, inflexible, too general and not adjusted the multitude of many individual situations."

It was variously suggested that procedures for quality assurance could be established through the use of regular reports, auditing, checking of CVs, peer review. Otherwise, quality assurance could be based on whatever procedures the component institutes currently employ.

5. Conclusion and Follow-up

By and large, the questionnaire survey results were in line with the results of the other consultations organised by the working group. There was clear support for more participation; more openness; greater breadth of expertise. The only possible divergence was on the question of independence: very many questionnaire respondents insisted that experts be independent, whereas the working group tended to question the very notion of independence, and emphasised instead the importance of disclosure of interest. Many cited current beneficial practises (e.g. deliberative procedures), and drew both positive and negative lessons from their own experiences in providing expert advice.

A summary of the early results of this questionnaire was presented to a workshop organised by the working group on 31 March, and an initial

assessment of the full response was fed into the deliberations of the working group.

The main messages from the questionnaire, taken with the rest of the work of the group, have therefore been integrated into the group's final report. This in turn will be reflected in the Commission's White Paper on European Governance.

It is expected that, as far as the European Research Area and expertise is concerned, many of the recommendations from the White Paper will be implemented by the Commission within the context of an Action Plan on Science, Society and the Citizen, due to be published by the end of 2001.

All those who took the trouble to participate in the questionnaire survey have made a valuable contribution to this process.

Alan Cross

July 2001

ANNEX

SUMMARY OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Note : the full document is available on :

<http://www.cordis.lu/rtd2002/science-society/governance.htm>

Part I: Personal information

- Family Name
 - First Name
 - Gender
 - Your role in the organisation
 - Type of organisation:
 - Organization
 - Department
 - Street/PO Box
 - Country
 - Postcode
 - Town
 - Tel nr.
 - Email
-
- Have you provided expert advice for policy-making ?
 - Have you been involved in receiving expert advice for policy-making ?
 - Have you contributed in other ways to the policy-making process or to public debate, (e.g. by representing the interests of stakeholder groups, involvement in focus groups or citizen conferences; coverage by the media; as an individual member of the public)?

Part II: Suggestions and views

Respondents were asked to structure their replies according to ten issues. In each case they were asked to list problems, current practices, and other suggestions, corresponding to these issues or any other further problems, practices and suggestions that do not correspond to the issues listed below.

- The role of experts in policy-making and public debate in general (e.g. independence, transparency, adequate, etc.)
- The timing of expert consultation in the different phases of the policy-making process.
- The type and range of expertise consulted.
- The selection of experts (e.g. who makes the selection; dealing with vested interests).
- How the experts should share information among themselves.
- What should be done when experts disagree (eg. two schools of thought; minority views).
- How uncertainties in the knowledge should be dealt with by the experts and by the policy-makers.
- Informing the public of the expert advice used in policy-making.
- Making the expertise understandable and accessible to the public.
- Dialogue and mutual learning between experts and the public.
- Role of the media.
- Establishment of common European scientific reference systems :
 - In what areas or for what issues should there be European scientific reference systems?
 - How should European systems link to relevant international activities (eg. WTO, IPCC, FAO)?
WTO: World Trade Organisation; IPCC: International Panel on Climate Change; FAO: Food and Agricultural Organisation
 - What features do you think should be included in scientific reference systems (eg. linked to transparency, plurality, integrity etc.)?
 - What quality assurance mechanisms should be established?
 - Any other comments on scientific reference systems:
- Any other comments you may have on this exercise, or on the science and governance debate in general.