

EASAC Extraordinary Council Meeting on COVID-19 Learning 17 June 2020

Summary

- The EASAC Extraordinary Council meeting was well-attended with 32 people representing 20 EASAC member academies. Its objectives were to learn from each other; inspire action at the national level; and provide ideas for any future EASAC initiatives on this issue.
- Breakout groups discussed learning from engaging with (1) the public; (2) science communities; and (3) governments and policymakers.
- Many participants shared their respective academy's reactive and proactive responses to the pandemic at the national level, supplementing [existing Council materials](#).
- No-one-size-fits-all. National context matters, especially in relation to science advisory mechanisms, which vary as much as the role and capacity of academies within EASAC.
- This is well-illustrated by the different approaches taken by member academies: for e.g.
 - *Advisory role*: preparing consensus statements/policy briefs on specific aspects of the pandemic and/or responding to government enquiries (e.g. Germany, Switzerland, Hungary).
 - *Research role*: academies with research institutes (e.g. Poland, Bulgaria)
 - *Convening role*: providing a platform for experts to come together (e.g. UK).
 - *Hybrid role*: part reactive, part proactive e.g. leading researchers and civil servants in public health institutes working alongside each other (e.g. Finland).
 - *Public engagement role*: providing information syntheses and clear advice to the public, outreach events (e.g. Sweden, Cyprus, Eire, Estonia)
 - *No role*: not to compete with strong public health authorities or cause confusion (e.g. Denmark, Norway). Some academies do not feel they necessarily have a role to play in crises.
- There is a real appetite for EASAC members to learn from one other, especially at the national level. COVID-19 has provided a unique and important insight into how the science community, including the academies, responds in crises, in real time, at pace.
- There seem to be mixed views on whether trust in science has increased or decreased over the past six months, and whether there might be a "blame game" and a potential backlash towards science and scientists.
- Member academies are invited to use the [EASAC Commentary on post-COVID-19 green recovery](#) and the [IAP communiqué on global solidarity](#) in their national dialogue and help disseminate their core messages.

Breakout session 1: Engaging with the public in a crisis

Key points

- COVID-19 has created an opportunity, and indeed responsibility, for academies to get better at communicating science to society. There is a public appetite for information, clarity and debate. Academies can help the public distinguish between different types of science/evidence, openly and transparently.
- Academies should communicate accurate scientific information and help counter fake or misinformation in real-time (can academies adjust to "the pace of reality"?)
- Building alliances/partnerships with good communicators is important. EASAC's Press and Communications Group can help academies engage with leading science journalists more systematically.
- IAP and EASAC statements and commentaries help give member academies a voice in society and all academies should endeavour to use them.
- Cyprus has put forward a proposal that EASAC convenes a series of public-facing, moderated discussion panels that bring together different stakeholders from different countries on a range of issues of public interest.

Breakout session 2: Mobilising academies and wider scientific communities in a crisis

Key points

- Academies can serve as a conduit for synthesising and communicating clear and accurate scientific information for policymakers and the public to digest. They are better connected to both communities than, say, universities, and can translate the most pertinent scientific findings to inform public policy.
- This is especially challenging in a fast-moving crisis scenario where so many questions need addressing urgently and a moving target makes it difficult to find consensus. Academies and the wider science community need to prioritise these demands quickly, and academies in particular can provide thinking space.
- Academies can learn from each other. For example, Croatia established crisis teams early on and has experienced low infection and mortality rates. Scientific expertise has been well received in Sweden, especially amongst the media, but this may be different in other countries.
- Academies with research institutes may have an additional role, though research institutes in Poland, for example, have shown themselves to be flexible and quick to respond to the crisis, with little academy intervention. Some laboratories have been repurposed and new research grants mobilised quickly. Each research institute could include a crisis preparedness plan in its funding strategy to further mobilise funds at pace.
- Some academies have been working hard to establish and sustain relations with policymakers and parliamentarians. The Austrian academy, for example, has been convening regular meetings between its parliamentarians and scientists throughout the COVID-19 crisis.
- International cooperation and collaboration are vital and must be sustained. Within the EU, health issues are owned by Member States, but in times of crisis some aspect(s) could be mandated to the European Commission to facilitate cooperation and communication.

Breakout session 3: Engaging with governments

Key points

- The degree to which academies have been advising their governments in the COVID-19 crisis varies greatly by country. In some countries, governments have approached the academies for advice; in others, the academies have proactively offered their advice; in some, it is a hybrid of the two. In one or two countries, other scientific institutions provide advice, so academies have stepped back to minimise potential confusion.

- The degree to which science advice for governments is successful depends on whether the individual government trusts science in general and/or proactively seeks scientific advice. Again, this varies significantly between countries.
- Academies have a responsibility to provide independent advice and present their views irrespective of whether the government approves and/or seeks their advice; whilst making it clear where the respective responsibilities of science advice and policy decision-making lie. In situations where multiple, sometimes contradictory, scientific advice exists (e.g. UK), there is a potential to lose public credibility, so advice should be open and transparent. The public is a vital conduit to reaching the politicians, using social and other media channels.

Breakout session 4: Applying learning from the COVID-19 crisis to the climate crisis

Key points

- High quality data, frameworks for providing access to good data, and good governance of data are all vital. Information must be updated as a crisis develops for use by policymakers and civil society. Academies can help to explain the role of science in political decision making. For the general public to maintain confidence in science and scientists, their role must be made clear: scientists advise, policymakers decide!
- The COVID-19 and climate crises can learn from each other. Scientists presenting a united front – for example, by publishing in respected journals - can help mobilise public enthusiasm and instil confidence.
- Multidisciplinary perspectives are vital and academies can play a convening role to bring different experts together to devise coherent messages for the public, to minimise contradiction and confusion.
- The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need for better sharing of health data between EU Member States, and the importance of health considerations in all policy areas. EU Member States should use the EU as a platform for sharing good practice and devising common definitions and metrics, e.g. for mortality statistics, to assist future understanding of health impacts.
- Shocks can lead to change. The COVID-19 crisis has forced profound behavioural change, some of value to climate crisis management but many may only be temporary. Social challenges – such as care for vulnerable groups – are also common to both.
- International cooperation and collaboration are crucial for speeding up studies because bigger datasets can be created by bringing teams together. Important areas for cooperation include green economic recovery, food security issues, transport issues, and the use of plastics (exacerbated by PPE).
- The Estonian Academy has produced a two page “vision” document on how the country should recover from the COVID crisis. This is available in English from the EASAC website, and contains a list of recommended actions, which other academies may like to explore. The Swedish Academy is exploring the resilience of the food supply chain, which may also be of use to others.

You can find national examples from all over the world on the IAP website at

<https://interacademies.org/node/52980>