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Where next for scientific advice in Europe?

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After the controversy over its chief scientific adviser, the European Commission now has an opportunity to put in place a world-class, open and accountable science advisory system.

António Vicente, Head of Cabinet for Commissioner Moedas, speaking yesterday at the Lisbon Council in Brussels at the launch of the book 'Future Directions for Scientific Advice in Europe'.



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Across Europe, science policy controversies – whether over climate, crops, fracking or food safety – regularly ripple across the headlines. But debates over the institutional arrangements for bringing scientific expertise into policy are more commonly confined to bureaucratic corridors and seminar rooms. So it has been surprising to see [the intensity of argument generated over the past year](#) about the structures for scientific advice within the European Commission.

[The decision by President Juncker not to renew the post of chief scientific adviser \(CSA\)](#) – a role created by his predecessor in 2012 and occupied for three years by the molecular biologist Anne Glover – was criticised by many in the science community as a backwards step, out of line with the broader march towards evidence-informed policymaking. Others saw it [as a welcome admission that the diversity of political cultures across Europe were ill-served by the addition of a UK-style science adviser](#) to the delicately-balanced Brussels mix.

[Speaking in November 2014 to Science magazine](#), a Commission spokesperson emphasized that “President Juncker believes in independent scientific advice”, but had not yet decided how to institutionalize the function. In January 2015, Juncker handed responsibility for the issue to Carlos Moedas, [asking his Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science](#) “to reflect and present options to me before the summer.” Interviewed by Nature on a visit to London last month, Moedas said [“I can promise you that there will be a system of scientific advice and it will be in place by the summer.”](#)

While options remain in flux, a new book on Future Directions for Scientific Advice in Europe, [launched yesterday at the Lisbon Council in Brussels](#), contains essays by several prominent voices in these debates – including Robert Madelin, director-general of DG Connect, Vladimir Sucha, director-general of the Joint Research Centre, and Doug Parr, chief scientist at Greenpeace UK. The book also contains Anne Glover’s most frank and detailed account yet of progress made, and challenges encountered, during her three years in Brussels.

Beneath headline disagreements over the CSA role, there are of course legitimate debates about the most effective arrangements for scientific advice, reflecting the diversity of political cultures across member states. And it is important to recognise that many European advisory committees and regulatory bodies (such as EFSA, the European Food Safety Authority) existed long before the creation of the CSA role, and continue to operate today. So the Moedas review does not start from a blank slate.

Speaking at the launch of the book in Brussels yesterday, António Vicente, head of Commissioner Moedas’ Cabinet, admitted that the scientific community’s reaction to the decision not to renew the CSA “took us by surprise. It was seen by some as a symbolic downgrading of science. But to pretend that one person was single-handedly ensuring the role of science in Europe was preposterous.”

Vicente said that the work of the Moedas review is nearing completion, and an announcement should be made before the summer. A final model has not yet been agreed, pending further input from President Juncker himself. But signals suggest that the review is leaning towards an expert panel, rather than an individual CSA, as its preferred mechanism for scientific advice; that this panel is likely to have a semi-autonomous secretariat within the Commission; and that it may have a more formal link to Europe's national academies of science.

As Vicente acknowledged yesterday, "the devil will be in the detail" of how any new structure is implemented. If the Commission does end up opting for an expert panel, questions that need to be resolved include:

- How will the members of such a panel be selected to ensure an appropriate mix of national, disciplinary and sectoral perspectives?
- How openly will panel members be recruited and appointed? And how will the ongoing transparency of the panel's work be ensured?
- How much time will panel members be expected to devote to its work, and will this be compensated, to enable proper levels of engagement?
- How will the panel link to other advisory structures, including the Joint Research Centre and regulators like EFSA?
- How will the panel balance its efforts between short-term emergencies and long-term foresight and horizon scanning?
- How will any links to the national academies operate? Can they ensure input from across the natural sciences, engineering, social sciences and humanities?

These debates in Brussels also link to a growing international discussion. At the end of August 2014, [scientists and policymakers from more than forty countries gathered in Auckland, New Zealand](#) to debate the politics and practices of scientific advice. Jointly hosted by Sir Peter Gluckman, New Zealand's chief scientific advisor and the [International Council for Science \(ICSU\)](#), the Auckland summit was the largest meeting of its kind, attracting science advisors and advisory bodies from Albania to Zimbabwe, and a host of countries in between.

The Auckland summit has now led to the establishment of an [International Network for Government Science Advice \(INGSA\)](#). This will provide a forum for policymakers, practitioners and academics to share experience, build capacity and test new approaches to scientific advice. Follow-up summits are planned for Brussels in 2016 and Tokyo in 2018, with a range of smaller workshops along the way, tackling topics such as science advice in emergencies, and the [role of scientific evidence in supporting the new UN sustainable development goals](#).

Last week, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) added its weight to this agenda with [a report on scientific advice](#) for

policymaking, which calls for common principles across different systems, and offers a checklist that governments can follow to ensure that their advisory processes are effective and trustworthy.

Over its first months in office, the new European Commission's approach to scientific advice has generated plenty of negative headlines. But by drawing on the best of what's been learnt elsewhere, the Commission now has an opportunity to move beyond the controversy and put in place a genuinely world-class, multi-disciplinary, open and accountable scientific advisory system. Within a matter of weeks, we will see whether the Moedas review grasps this opportunity.

'Future Directions for Scientific Advice in Europe' is available free to download here. <http://www.csap.cam.ac.uk/projects/future-directions-scientific-advice-europe/>

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