
SINAPSE

A better use of expertise in European governance

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- Het digitale *SINAPSE*-netwerk - voluit genaamd: Scientific Information for Policy Support in Europe - is een webgeoriënteerd communicatieplatform onder auspiciën van de Europese Commissie. Het netwerk heeft zich tot doel gesteld om een (nieuwe) interface te ontwikkelen tussen de wetenschap en de expertise aan de ene kant en de publieke sector en de politiek aan de andere, meer in het bijzonder dan de Europese instellingen. SINAPSE dient als instrument om het beleid te verbeteren en om nieuwe vormen van bestuur toe te laten. Een ruimere en directere participatie van wie men de stakeholders kan noemen, draagt hietoe bij. Het netwerk werd uitgedacht om een betere wetenschappelijk ondersteuning van beleidsbeslissingen te waarborgen.
- Le réseau *SINAPSE* (pour Scientific Information for Policy Support in Europe) est une plateforme de communication orientée Web placée sous les auspices de la commission européenne. Le réseau a pour objectif de développer une (nouvelle) interface entre d'une part les scientifiques et les experts, et d'autre part le secteur public et politique – et de façon plus précise les institutions européennes. SINAPSE est un outil destiné à améliorer la gestion européenne et à développer de nouvelles formes d'administration. Il favorise une participation plus large et plus directe de la part des divers intervenants. Le réseau a été pensé de manière à garantir un meilleur support scientifique aux prises de décisions institutionnelles.

Expertise is increasingly becoming an element of critical importance in the design, implementation and assessment of public policies. As a result, the policy-makers must be in a position to effectively consult the world of experts and give them the opportunity to share their concerns and knowledge. Consulting and listening under time pressure to an ever larger number of experts, on issues of growing complexity, is however difficult.

It is towards this end that the European Commission has developed the *SINAPSE*¹ e-Network. The main objective of this web-based communication platform is to offer a set of essential tools to promote and encourage the effective exchange of information between all stakeholders concerned by the use of expertise in European governance.

SINAPSE will help the practical implementation of new forms of governance, by facilitating the involvement of actors who are currently hard to consult, and enabling them to share their knowledge and viewpoints. The network will also contribute to improve the breadth and scope of the information available to the public.

The current membership consists of universities, national academy of sciences, scientific associations, several national research / health / ethics councils, various research organisations and advisory bodies, covering different policy areas, as well as other organisations interested by the use of expertise and science in policy-making (NGOs, industrial companies/associations – e.g. UNICE – etc.).

Examples of registered scientific organisations at European/international level so far include: ESF

(European Science Foundation), ICSU (International Council for Science), ALLEA (All European Academies), FEAM (Federation of the European Academies of Medicine), Academia European, EASAC (European Academies' Science Advisory Council), EUA (European University Association), UNICA (Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe), EURO-CASE (European Council of Applied Sciences, Technologies and Engineering), EMBO (European Molecular Biology Organisation), COST (European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research), EARTO (European Association of Research and Technology Organisations), EARMA (European Association of Research Managers and Administrators), EIRMA (European Industrial Research Management Association), EUROHORCS (European Union Research Organisations Head of Research Councils).

***SINAPSE* is open and freely accessible on**
<<http://europa.eu/sinapse>>

Communication tools

SINAPSE is a multi-purpose communication tool that offers the following functions for its members:

Who's Who and Yellow Pages

SINAPSE intends to become a repository of organisations and individuals who play, or could play, a useful role in expert advice processes. The users are, in particular, able to perform advanced searches to identify Sinapse members with a specific expertise or profile.

Library of scientific opinions and advice

The aim of the *SINAPSE* electronic library is to collect expert and scientific opinions/advice produced across and outside Europe, in order to increase their dissemination, use and impact. Based on their "notification preferences", members can choose to be alerted as soon as documents in their domain(s) of interest are posted. As the number of documents increases, public authorities and advisory bodies seeking to investigate specific issues will be able to use an advanced search engine to check whether any relevant work has already been carried out. Access to the results of complementary exercises will benefit their work and contribute to reducing the risk of unnecessary duplication of effort.

EC Consultation

SINAPSE will allow the European Commission services to support existing mechanisms to consult experts, such as committee meetings. Opinions, advice or background information in specific areas of expertise will be gathered with the help of the network's members. The informal nature of the process and the flexibility offered by the e-network will enable the Commission to tap into a wider reservoir of knowledge and to obtain rapid feedback.

Early-warning system

The members of *SINAPSE* can use this channel for sending early-warning signals and raising awareness of issues where expertise plays a significant role. This should not only help to detect potential crises, but will also lead to the sharing of useful practices that could be exploited on a European scale.

Communication among members

SINAPSE offers communication modules to launch expert debates, as well as for conducting questionnaire-based surveys and consultations. For the latter, *SINAPSE* also provides a statistical overview of the results, and gives the possibility to export the data for further analysis. The initiators decide whether the debates are open or restricted to a group of selected participants, with the possibility of extending, on request, the right to participate to other members. Individual members, organisations or European Commission services, can therefore be excluded, so that restricted discussions can take place.

Sinapse Communities

The "Communities" module enables groups of members with a common interest (a specific issue, a domain of expertise, etc.) to create a permanent platform for sharing and exchanging information. Members of a community have, in particular, access to a library of documents, a library of web links, a message board, and are able to launch discussions or surveys with all or part of the community's members. A notification system with enhanced filters allows community members to be aware of new activities of their interest (new documents on a certain topic posted in the library, new conferences organised by community members etc.). Beyond the internal communication possibilities, one advantage of setting up a community in *SINAPSE* is the capacity to establish links with other networks/organisations and to enlarge, if appropriate, the community to new relevant members.

Sinapse Web search

SINAPSE will progressively offer the possibility to perform thematic and focused searches in its members' websites. One of the main objectives is to increase the visibility of these information sources. Another, is that it might over time give access to some resources that are not yet taken into account by other search engines. The fact that Sinapse searches will be performed on a limited number of identified and qualified sources will increase the pertinence of the search results and minimise the "information white-noise". Since the owners of the information are members of the network, the user will also be able to instantly get further details on the sources, and use filters to only display, for example, search results originating from certain categories of organisations.

Communication features

SINAPSE aims to reproduce the way people traditionally exchange information. Efforts have been undertaken to minimise the negative side effects of some internet-based tools, where for example the users are not always fully aware of the identity of the people they are addressing, should be avoided.

Although it is an open network, *SINAPSE* intends to respect the level of confidentiality required and expected by its members. This implies that users are in most cases able to decide who has access to the information they publish (e.g. uploading advice in the library, sending out an early warning, or posting a contribution to a debate). This means they can determine whether their contri-

bution should be accessible by everybody, or only by network members/organisations, a subgroup of them, or the Commission Services.

SINAPSE members, whether they are individuals or organisations, can use different filters to help them control incoming messages. They can determine, for example, how frequently they are notified of new items matching their profiles and from which types of organisations they wish to receive messages and invitations to e-debates.

To guarantee the sustainability and manageability of the system, the type of tools made available to a member depends on his/her profile (e.g. an unregistered guest does not have access to the same functions as a registered research organisation).

Membership and the use of *SINAPSE* is free and on a voluntary basis, and the functionalities currently offered will be adapted according to the evolving needs of the *SINAPSE* members.

Building the European Yellow Pages of Expertise

The widest possible membership, and therefore knowledge reservoir, is an essential factor in achieving the objectives of *SINAPSE*. Although many experts and a substantial part of the scientific community are directly or indirectly represented in the network, the building of the *SINAPSE* community remains a priority. It is not only important that umbrella and individual organisations are registered, but in particular that their members with specific and general expertise are registered in the system as well.

Registering in the *SINAPSE* Directory brings per se the following benefits:

- On the basis of the information provided during the registration, members have the possibility of being notified of new documents, early warnings, discussions or consultations, compatible with their preferences (e.g. fields of expertise, policy domains of interest);
- Since their expertise is referenced in the system, members can be contacted by other members who might be looking for such competencies, giving them the opportunity to share their opinions (e.g. in the case of con-

sultations/debates launched by the EC or other public authorities);

- The content of the registered organisations' websites (web sources) will be more visible and easily accessible by an interested public;
- The possibility to create or join, as they develop over time, *SINAPSE* Communities made up of sub groups of members sharing a common interest.

ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS WITH A SPECIFIC EXPERTISE (INCLUDING SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES) OR A DIRECT INTEREST IN THE USE OF EXPERTISE AND SCIENCE IN POLICY MAKING ARE INVITED TO REGISTER AND TO ACTIVELY PROMOTE THE REGISTRATION OF THEIR RELEVANT NETWORK AND PROFESSIONAL CONTACTS

Increasing the capacity to communicate and exchange information whenever necessary, between the experts and the users of expertise, is crucial. Through the active participation of its members, *SINAPSE* aims at becoming a useful interface between the experts and policy-makers.

It is not foreseen that during phase the site will host many active debates and consultations, or contain large amounts of information and documents. Activities and content will progressively increase and members will be promptly notified according to their profile and notification preferences.

However, this should not prevent the members from being active right from the start, to the contrary. For example **we encourage members to upload documents** (compatible with *SINAPSE* objectives), which can be of interest to other members and would benefit from a wide dissemination. Members are also invited to contact us in order to **build thematic e-communities** to facilitate a more structured communication among their networks.

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Note

¹ Scientific information and expertise for policy support in Europe.