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SINAPSE: Providing scientific information for policy-making

Today the European Commission is launching SINAPSE (Scientific INformation for Policy Support in Europe), a tool which is designed to make scientific advice more easily available for policy-makers at European and national level.

What is SINAPSE?

SINAPSE is a web-based communication platform which promotes and encourages the exchange of information between the scientific community and all policy-makers who use science to help reach decisions.

Why is it needed?

Scientific expertise is increasingly becoming a critical element in the design, implementation and assessment of public policies. This means that policy-makers must be able to consult the scientific community. Scientists should have an opportunity to share their concerns and knowledge. This will ensure that decisions are objective and based on sound scientific evidence. However, the current wealth of scientific expertise, from an increasing variety of sources, coupled with the requirement for quick responses from many decision-makers, pose a considerable challenge.

SINAPSE aims to tackle these problems by providing means for decision-makers to identify and consult relevant experts quickly. It is a tool whereby scientists can make their expertise and research available to those who can make use of it. It will also contribute to improving the amount and quality of information available to the public.

What will it do?

SINAPSE will offer its members a whole range of different functions.

It will be a library of scientific opinion and advice.

The SINAPSE electronic library will collect scientific opinions and advice produced across Europe and outside. Members will indicate their areas of particular interest, and will receive an automatic alert when a new document in that area is posted. Users such as public authorities and advisory/regulatory bodies will be able to use an advanced search engine to see if research already exists in the area they are interested in. As well as ensuring a sound basis for policy decisions, it will reduce the risk of duplication of work.

It will be a tool for the European Commission to consult the scientific community

SINAPSE will provide a support for existing scientific consultations mechanisms, such as expert committees. Members of the network will assist in the gathering of scientific opinions, advice and background information. The European Commission will be able to draw on a large pool of expertise and within short deadlines.

It will be an early-warning system.

SINAPSE will be a channel for early-warning for issues that could have major impact across Europe, such as a food safety or animal health problem.

It will provide a forum for communication across Europe.

SINAPSE will support intra- and inter-disciplinary discussions across Europe. It will be used to conduct questionnaire-based surveys and consultations, provide a statistical overview of results and make available data analysis for download. Debates can be set up, with participants free to have them open or restricted to selected members.

It will be a Who's Who and Yellow Pages of European science.

SINAPSE will be a point of reference for information on organisations and individuals with a useful role to play in scientific advice. Members will be identified with specific areas of expertise to assist searching.

It will be a portal for web searching.

As it develops, SINAPSE will offer the possibility of thematic searches across the websites of its members. This will allow it access to some resources not yet available to other search engines. This focussed approach will increase the relevance of web search results.

How will it work?

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 contribution 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 functions to which a member has access 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.

SINAPSE will be as successful as its members make it. The widest possible membership is the most important factor in achieving the objectives of SINAPSE. Individuals and organisations with a scientific expertise or interest are invited to register and to promote the registration among their networks and professional contacts.

Who will use SINAPSE?

Participants already signed up include: European University Association (750 universities in 45 countries); European Academies' Science Advisory Council; European Science Foundation; International Council for Science; Food Safety Agencies at national level; national and regional ethics committees; national councils for research and technology. Users will come from the services of the European Commission and other European institutions in the first instance. It will also be a useful tool for public authorities at national, regional and local level.

Why should I get involved?

Registration brings several benefits:

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

Through the active participation of its members, SINAPSE should become a new and useful interface between the scientific community and policy-makers.

On 10 March SINAPSE will be open for registration and use. It is not foreseen that during this initial phase the site will host many active debates and consultations, or contain large amounts of information and documents. However, activities and content will progressively increase and members will be promptly notified according to their profile and notification preferences.

See also [IP/05/271](#).