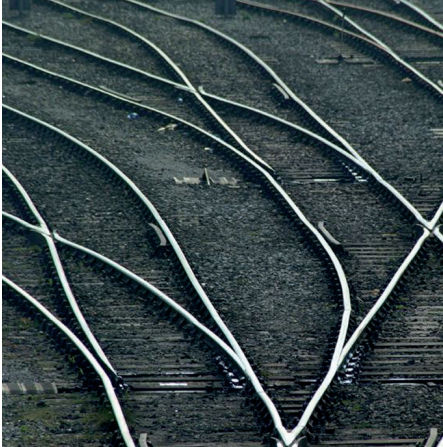




Akademien der Wissenschaften Schweiz
Académies suisses des sciences
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Academias svizras da las ciencias
Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences

Scientific policy advice

**Recommendations of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences
for researchers**



Publication details

Issued by

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Layout

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Background

Whatever the issue may be – genetically modified crops, climate change or youth violence – scientific expertise provides an essential basis for policymaking: policymakers require sound scientific information if they are to make decisions. In the political arena, expert reports are all the more valuable if they are prepared by researchers and institutions with an impeccable reputation. This is particularly true whenever scientific opinions are sought on politically sensitive matters. It is thus of prime importance for scientists providing policy advice to protect their own reputation. The present recommendations indicate the key points to note when providing advice on scientific policy.

Swiss policymakers require facts

In Switzerland's political system, policy advice is of major importance – witness especially the consultation procedures, the various expert committees, the Extraparliamentary Commissions, and the mandates and contracts assigned to scientific bodies by government agencies and the Administration.

«Scientific policy advice» refers to the elaboration, exploration or explanation of scientific foundations for the entire political process – notably the political decision-making process.

However, as the demand for scientific policy advice grows, problems also increasingly arise (e.g. a lack of transparency or independence). While most of these problems are not entirely new, their significance has increased markedly in connection with ever-more complex issues and the desire for greater transparency in political decision-making processes. The tensions between science and politics are particularly acute when new knowledge is generated and fed into the political debate without being requested by policymakers – in such cases, the credibility of research is indispensable.

Science must maintain its credibility

Against this background, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences saw a need to reflect on the role of experts in the provision of policy advice. Similar deliberations are being conducted in other countries – for example in the UK, where an evidence-based policy approach has recently been advocated, and in Germany, where guidelines on policy advice were published by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities in 2008.

In Switzerland, efforts along these lines are being pursued in the evaluation field, for instance, by the Swiss Evaluation Society (SEVAL); likewise, guidelines on «Quality assurance in federal departmental research» have been prepared within the Federal Administration.

The main aims of the present recommendations are to assure the quality of scientific expert opinions and, at the same time, to help to maintain or enhance the credibility of researchers when – as is increasingly the case – their advice is sought by policymakers.

Those who provide advice should comply with guidelines

This document presents recommendations which are addressed both to researchers and to scientific institutions, and which should be followed whenever advisory mandates are accepted. Although these recommendations are not explicitly addressed to policymakers or the Administration, there is nothing to prevent those who seek policy advice from being guided voluntarily by them.

In offering these recommendations, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences wish to actively support efforts to promote quality assurance in scientific policy advice. Accordingly, they will be disseminated not only in scientific circles but also among those who request and receive scientific advice. At the same time, the Academies will encourage debate on the importance of scientific knowledge and on how it is handled.

Recommendations

Clarify the circumstances

Before the provision of advice (under a mandate or on one's own initiative) is contemplated, the circumstances should be clarified. Specifically, the following points are to be investigated:

- Is the purpose of the advice clearly defined?
- Is the necessary expertise available to express a view on the matter in question?
- Are there any potential conflicts of interest?
- According to what criteria are experts to be selected?
- Are there any reasons for consulting additional scientists?
- Does the client have any guidelines or recommendations which are to be followed?
- Is the assignment feasible?

The results of these investigations are to be appropriately documented.

Guarantee quality

Policy advice complies with the usual scientific standards – i.e., it distinguishes between the presentation and the interpretation of facts, and presents controversial results and assessments openly. The applicability of the conclusions drawn and the associated implications should be specified. Policy advice in written form should ideally be subject to expert review, appropriate to the matter and discipline in question; this should be agreed when the mandate is accepted.

Communicate clearly

Policy advice aims to be readily comprehensible for non-specialists. However, comprehensibility must not be achieved at the expense of scientific quality. Any simplifications required are to be documented. It should be made clear how conclusions are arrived at.

Ensure independence

Policy advice should ideally be provided in an unbiased manner – i.e., those involved in preparing the expert report should have no personal or financial interest in the outcome of the political decision-making process. Experts providing advice are to declare their interests and disclose any other circumstances that could lead to conflicts of interest. These details are to be made available on request.

Create transparency

The advisory process and the validity and limits of the expert report must be clear and comprehensible. Statements, conclusions and the associated uncertainties and limitations must be documented and presented in full. The sources used are to be cited and must be verifiable.

Facilitate access

Unless the relevant political process requires confidentiality, experts should aim to ensure that the written products of policy advice are accessible to the public, at least after the completion of the advisory process. The details of this process are to be documented and made available on request.

Consult committees rather than individuals

In the case of complex or scientifically controversial topics, it is often advisable not to have an expert report prepared by a single expert. If this task is assumed by a committee, the criteria for the appointment of members should be made clear.

Discussions within expert committees should be confidential. Experts should primarily discuss their different viewpoints at scientific meetings, and reach agreement on how policymakers and the public are to be informed about existing uncertainties.

Make spontaneous contributions transparent

In general, policy advice is provided on request. It may also be initiated by researchers themselves. Any potential conflicts of interest must be clearly indicated in the expert report.

Information on the preparation of the recommendations on scientific policy advice

Origins

In the spring of 2008, the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities published comprehensive guidelines on good practice in the provision of scientific policy advice (*Leitlinien Politikberatung*).

In the autumn of 2008, the Board of Directors of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences asked a number of external experts to consider whether a similar document would also be desirable for Switzerland. All the experts consulted took the view that guidelines on the provision of policy advice would be welcome; such guidelines should be primarily addressed to researchers and should initially be developed within and for the Academies of Arts and Sciences.

Mandate

In the spring of 2009, in response to this feedback, the Board of Directors of the Academies of Arts and Sciences requested the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences to establish a working group, with 1–2 representatives from each academy, which – within a year – was to produce an initial draft of guidelines on scientific policy advice adapted for Swiss purposes.

Composition and procedure of the working group

The following individuals were members of the working group:

- Professor Fred Paccaud, University of Lausanne (Chair)
- Professor Ursula Ackermann-Lieblich, University of Basel
- Dr Hermann Amstad, SAMS, Basel
- Professor Andreas Ladner, IDHEAP, Lausanne
- Dr Stephan Nussbaum, SCNAT, Bern
- Professor Fritz Sager, University of Bern
- Professor Nils Soguel, IDHEAP, Lausanne
- Professor Ulrich Suter, ETH Zurich
- Professor Felix Uhlmann, University of Zurich

The working group prepared an initial draft of the recommendations at three meetings held between September 2009 and March 2010.

At the fourth and last meeting of the working group in August 2010, following a broad consultation procedure (see below), the responses received were examined and a final version of the recommendations was produced.

Quality assurance

In the spring of 2010, a broad consultation procedure took place, involving the following institutions and selected individuals:

«Public» institutions engaged in scientific policy advice:

- Universities
- Federal Institutes of Technology (including EAWAG, EMPA, PSI)
- Universities of Applied Sciences
- Swiss National Science Foundation
- Academies (including TA-SWISS)
- Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration (IDHEAP)
- Swiss Science and Technology Council
- Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities (CRUS)

«Private» institutions engaged in scientific policy advice:

- Avenir Suisse
- Swiss Society for Applied Social Research (GfS)
- ecopolitics

Administration:

- Federal Office for the Environment
- Federal Office of Public Health
- Federal Office for Spatial Development
- Federal Office of Energy
- Federal Office for Agriculture
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- State Secretariat for Education and Research
- Conference of the Cantonal Governments (KdK)

More than 20 responses were received. The development of recommendations on scientific policy advice was widely welcomed, and the draft was described as excellent and appropriate.

The present recommendations were discussed and adopted at a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences held on 13 December 2010.

Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences: Science serving society

The Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences is the umbrella body of Switzerland's four academies – the Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT), the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences (SAMS), the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAHS) and the Swiss Academy of Engineering Sciences (SATW). Other members include the Centre for Technology Assessment (TA-SWISS) and various scientific networks.

The Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences promote scientific exchanges at the regional, national and international level. They represent the scientific community both within individual disciplines and on interdisciplinary matters, cutting across institutions and fields of study. They adopt a longterm perspective and are committed to scientific excellence. They provide science-based advice to policymakers and the public on questions of relevance to society as a whole.

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