

Guideline

Good practice for scientific policy advice

Preamble

Scientific policy advice operates at the interface between political and scientific systems. Its purpose is to provide research findings to those involved in policy processes. Policy advice aims to provide objective, evidence-based input to policy makers to help address specific policy problems. In an ideal world, the consultation process is carried out jointly by scientists and policy makers. However, it is the policy makers who are ultimately responsible for making decisions as they are also the ones who have the democratic legitimation to do so.

Scientific policy advice appears in different guises and settings, ranging from phone calls with individual scientists to setting up (permanent) advisory committees which draw up publicly available expert reports or recommendations. Particularly in institutions where research is commissioned from governmental research institutions,¹ policy advice is frequently informal and not issued by advisory committees. In many cases, policy advice may also be addressed to the relevant department of public administration.

Fields of application

This document on Good practice for scientific policy advice applies to all business units within the Austrian National Public Health Institute (Gesundheit Österreich GmbH) and for all types of policy advice. The advisory relationships between public administration and science are subject to slightly different regulations and as such are not explicitly covered by this document.

Core principles of good scientific policy advice

The principles outlined below cover issues relating to the advisory relationship between political decision makers and science in various settings and pertain equally to both parties. They are based on the premise that the responsibility for political decisions lies with democratically accountable political authorities and that scientific advisors vouch for the high quality of their expertise.

Scientific integrity and evidence-based practice

- The recognized standards, methods and core principles of scientific integrity and good research practice – like honesty, reliability, objectivity, diligence, independence and transparency – also apply to scientific policy advice.²

¹ cf. https://www.bmbf.de/files/konzept_ressortforschung.pdf [accessed on 12.12.2020]

² cf. The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity <https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/> [accessed on 12.12.2020]

- Scientific policy advice should be independent; freedom of inquiry in research must not be restricted.
- Recommendations and conclusions provided as part of scientific policy advice must be based on scientifically derived evidence, the quality of which has been critically evaluated by the scientists involved. The basis for that evidence must be made explicit.
- Scientists must maintain their neutrality and should not adopt politically motivated positions which have not been scientifically substantiated. Scientists should make their own value systems explicit and establish clear dividing lines between their scientific expertise and their political opinions.
- Scientists must clearly point out key gaps in their knowledge as well as uncertainties and other limitations so that policy makers can weigh up the imponderables and can make competent decisions. Implicit assumptions of values also have to be made explicit.

Roles and responsibilities

- Successful policy advice relies on an understanding of the differences between science and politics.
- Policy makers should respect the values of scientific freedom and independence and should also respect the professionalism and expertise of their scientific advisors.
- Scientific advisors, in turn, should respect the democratic legitimation of governments as well as the fact that political decisions have to be made while taking numerous factors into account.

Transparency of the process and the results

- Transparent and comprehensible communication is a vital prerequisite for acceptance and trust.
- Appointments to committees should follow a transparent procedure based on comprehensible criteria and a list of members should be published. Any potential conflicts of interest and circumstances which could affect the credibility of a committee's expertise must be disclosed by everybody concerned.
- The questions posed by political authorities to scientific advisors / committees must be clearly defined before work commences. In particular, it must be specified whether recommendations for action are to be made. Should this be the case, clear dividing lines must be established between those recommendations and the scientific findings.
- Once the process has been completed, the results of the research and consultation process (including any possible limitations) must be disclosed. Any restrictions associated with publication should be expressly agreed on when the work is commissioned and the contracting authority must clearly justify such restrictions.
- Rules of confidentiality which were agreed on must be observed by all parties concerned.
- Policy makers are required to treat the outcomes of the consultation process fairly (no distortions or deliberate misinterpretations).