

Raising their game

Academia Europaea celebrated its 25th anniversary last year, but its impact on research politics is not what it could be. **Rebecca Hill** spoke to the academy's board members about their plans to boost its profile.

In 1988, six European academics, backed by the UK's Royal Society, founded Academia Europaea, a non-governmental association aimed at uniting Europe's best researchers, scholars and scientists. The idea was to create a Pan-European voice on science and policy issues, separate from the EU member states' national academies.

Today, despite having nearly 3,000 members and its sights set on 2,000 more, the academy could, according to its board members, do much more.

"I don't think Academia Europaea is as effective as it could be at commenting on research policy issues," says vice-president Anne Buttimer, a geographer at University College Dublin. "It should be able to speak for Europe as a whole, but it's not doing that at the moment; it's still finding its way."

Foreign secretary and Polish physicist Jerzy Langer notes that the academy responds to specific public policy issues through the European Academies Science Advisory Council, of which it is a founding member. But the academy is "qualified to address serious research policy matters" separately, and needs to do more to gain visibility in Europe, he says.

President Lars Walløe, a physiologist at the University of Oslo, will soon step down, with elections for his successor taking place in May. He says one of Academia Europaea's biggest assets is having members from the humanities and social sciences as well as the natural sciences. "There are more problems faced by the social sciences and humanities," he says. "We need to take a much more active approach in that field."

With that in mind, Academia Europaea is in talks with Allea, the All European Academies group, and Easac, which only deals with natural science, to develop a similar body to Easac for the humanities and social sciences. This would involve an independent panel looking at the same issues as Easac but from a humanities and social sciences perspective. The two groups would then meet to discuss their findings. "A group focusing on these disciplines doesn't exist in Europe and it's a real gap," says David Coates, executive secretary of Academia Europaea. "We hope we'll get something in place this year."

Meanwhile, Buttimer would like to see Brussels being more sensitive to differences in political culture in the 28 member states. She hopes the academy can encourage discussions about regional differences through its

knowledge hubs, which were launched two years ago to spread its activities across Europe.

The hubs are in Wrocław, Poland, and Barcelona, Spain. A third is scheduled to open in Bergen, Norway, by May. Each focuses on issues specific to its region, with the Barcelona base set to be the academy's humanities hub as part of the push to support the discipline.

The academy aims to promote itself more effectively across Europe and encourage more nominations for eastern European members. Membership is particularly low in eastern countries, with nearly half of all members based in the UK, Germany and France. This is partly because the western countries have a longer research tradition, with more researchers eligible for membership. Additionally, prospective members must be nominated by two existing members. This poses a problem for eastern academics, who may not be as well known outside their country and are reliant on an already underrepresented group to nominate them.

Another goal for Academia Europaea is to spread the costs of its work more evenly. The hubs are paid for with regional or national funds, which Coates says are of particular importance to offset a "very substantial" fall in core funding from organisations such as the Royal Society since the start of the economic crisis. The drop in core funding hasn't affected money for events, conferences and workshops. This has always been sought on an ad hoc, project-specific basis, he says. But the academy has had to make other savings, for example by paring down the staff in its London office.

Academia Europaea brings in cash from membership, but the annual subscription fee of €100 is not compulsory. This decision was influenced by differing attitudes across Europe, says Ole Petersen, chairman of the nominations committee and a biologist at Cardiff University. "There isn't the tradition of paying subscriptions in continental Europe, which was a problem initially," he explains. "But it's not possible to sustain the academy without it, as we have always said we don't want to be completely tied to the EU. Unlike for the national academies, there is no government to support us." *Something to add? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com*

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