SAPEA Expert Workshop on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Thursday 5 February 2026, 13.00 to 17.30, Brussels (hybrid)

Workshop Report

v. 24 February 2026

Introduction and purpose of the workshop

The Expert Workshop on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) was convened by the Young Academies Science Advice Structure (YASAS) as part of the revision and expansion of the EDI Strategy for **SAPEA** (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies). The workshop brought together around 30 participants, including members of the SAPEA EDI Working Group, invited EDI experts, representatives of the SAPEA and YASAS Boards, and SAPEA staff.

Invited experts were primarily drawn from the pool of nominees submitted in response to the SAPEA call for nominations to establish the EDI Working Group. Many were affiliated with Young Academies within YASAS and brought expertise in science advice, institutional governance, equality law, gender and intersectionality research, and organisational EDI strategy development. Participants attended both in person and online.

The workshop was a key milestone in revising SAPEA's approach to EDI**.** The purpose was to examine current practices, review lessons from other scientific advisory bodies and explore how to implement EDI principles effectively and meaningfully to enhance SAPEA's science-for-policy impact and build capacity for the future. Particular emphasis was placed on inclusive participation, intersectionality, monitoring practices, and embedding EDI in core scientific advisory processes. Emerging insights and recommendations will feed directly into the development of the EDI strategy.

The workshop was framed by the recognition that EDI in scientific advisory processes is not only a matter of fairness, but directly linked to the quality, robustness, and societal relevance of the advice that is produced by SAPEA.

SAPEA context and current state of play

SAPEA operates within the Scientific Advice Mechanism to the European Commission, with the task to review and synthesize existing scientific evidence and contribute independent evidence reviews that inform policy recommendations prepared by the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors. The advisory process includes topic scoping, expert nomination and selection, evidence review, peer review, expert workshops, and final delivery of advice.

SAPEA is currently following two EDI-related strategies Strategy to increase the involvement of early- and mid-career researchers in SAPEA (December 2024) and the Strategy of Diversity and Inclusiveness (2023). These have introduced formal diversity targets for SAPEA Working Groups such as a gender balance target of no more than 60% of one gender, minimum participation thresholds for early-career and mid-career researchers, targets for representation from widening countries, and a requirement that at least half of Working Group members be fellows of academies.

Recent performance analysis shows that several of these targets have been met, indicating that SAPEA has made measurable progress in strengthening diversity and representation. However, further reflection is needed on inclusive participation, as well as on power and intersectional dynamics, across all stages of the advisory process.

Keynote: Importance of embedding EDI in the provision of scientific advice

It was highlighted that EDI must be embedded in scientific advice because those who define what counts as scientific knowledge shape how the world is understood. Epistemic authority was described as not neutral or purely meritocratic; access to knowledge production depends on historically shaped positions of power, resources and social capital. As a result, exclusion affects not only who participates in science, but also what knowledge is produced and how socially relevant, robust and useful it is.

Reflecting on developments in European research and innovation policy, it was noted that while progress on gender equality has been made since the early 2000s, it has been uneven and fragile. Only in the most recent European Research Area policy cycle intersectional gender inequalities, broader EDI considerations, gender-based violence, and stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms have been explicitly recognised. It was furthermore discussed that equality, diversity and inclusion are preconditions for research excellence, integrity and responsibility, and must form part of the social contract between science and society.

In a context of overlapping global crises and political backlash against EDI and academic freedom, scientific advice was portrayed as more vital than ever, making it essential to scrutinise who provides advice, how research problems are framed, whose realities are recognised as relevant, and how deliberations are structured. It was expressed that exclusion and discrimination persist within research institutions, often met with inadequate or unsafe reporting mechanisms, disproportionately affecting those in precarious or marginalised positions.

It was stressed that an institutional change approach that moves beyond “fixing women” toward transforming institutions and knowledge production processes themselves is needed. In this context, EDI must be integrated across the entire knowledge cycle, from framing research questions to interpreting and communicating findings. A key challenge identified was implementation: moving from policy commitments on paper to proactive, evidence-based institutional practice. Without integrating considerations of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background and disability, science advice risks producing weaker evidence, wasting public resources, and failing its responsibility to society.

PART 1: Insights from science-policy organisations and EDI strategy development

Insights from EDI strategy development and important lessons

Recurring patterns of failure in organizational EDI were identified. While formal commitments to EDI principles are increasingly common, concerns were raised about ineffective progress measurement, diversity and inclusion without equity as well as random or reactive activity. A frequently cited issue was the absence of a clear theory of change. Without a clear understanding of what needs to be changed, what causes the problem, and what outcomes are expected, multiple issues were seen to arise.

It was noted that random or reactive activities create the impression of increasing intervention, without a clear definition of the problem they are meant to address. When the link between problem and action is weak, EDI interventions were described as tending to focus on visible symptoms rather than underlying structural issues. Progress was said to be often measured only through inputs, rather than assessing what has actually changed within the system. As a result, EDI risks being treated as a standalone tool, rather than a driver of meaningful or lasting change at a deeper level.

The use of a theory of change framework was presented as a means of introducing greater methodological discipline into EDI strategy development. It was stressed that an EDI strategy should be subject to the same analytical rigour as scientific processes. Three guiding questions were highlighted: what specific inequities shape the provision of scientific advice; through which mechanisms these inequities persist; and what observable improvement would look like in practice.

A theory of change approach was presented as key for strengthening coherence between EDI objectives and the core mandate of scientific advisory bodies. By clarifying the link between diagnosis, intervention and outcome, organisations may avoid ineffective or symbolic activity and ensure that EDI is embedded within, rather than positioned alongside the production of scientific advice. In this framing, EDI becomes an operational component of how knowledge is generated, expertise is recognised, and influence is exercised, and is subject to the same level of rigour as scientific work itself.

Lessons from other scientific advisory mechanisms

The IPCC experience

The case of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was presented as an example of efforts to integrate gender diversity, equality and inclusion within a large scientific assessment body. The IPCC, a partnership of 195 governments operating in multi-year assessment cycles, produces assessment reports, special reports, methodology reports and technical papers.

It was underlined that principles in IPCC governing documents mandate consideration of gender and regional representation in the nomination of Bureau members, authors, and participants in expert meetings. These principles are applied throughout the report preparation and review stages, with oversight by the Gender Action Team, established in 2020. A Code of Conduct has been initially adopted across Working Groups, alongside expert discussions on GDEI. Additional measures include training initiatives, funding support mechanisms, and hybrid participation options to improve accessibility and

inclusion. Regional outreach events and webinars have been introduced to expand engagement. Efforts support the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and strengthen collaboration with other UNFCCC constituencies.

Progress during the current (seventh) assessment cycle was described as notable, with female authors now exceeding male representation and greater involvement from developing countries. A hybrid expert meeting in 2025 further examined EDI in the IPCC. At the same time, persistent barriers were acknowledged, including systemic structural issues, behavioral and cultural challenges, accountability, and limited monitoring. Recommendations from the IPCC expert meeting are expected to be released in March at the upcoming IPCC session and will guide future efforts to strengthen gender diversity and inclusivity in the organisation.

The SCAR experience

The SCAR Action Group on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), formally established in 2022, was presented as an example of efforts to promote inclusive practices within an international research coordination body. Its mandate includes raising awareness within SCAR working groups, collaborating with other EDI initiatives in the polar and wider research community to exchange good practices and improve impacts.

Significant milestones were achieved, including the development of an inclusive code of conduct adaptable across conferences and research programs, guidance for Open Science Conferences to support caregiving and accessibility, and active training and engagement with international partners. Increased visibility through social media initiatives, webinars and collaboration with accessibility organisations was noted as part of ongoing outreach efforts.

At the same time, several challenges were identified. These included reliance on volunteer work, limited funding, slow decision-making processes requiring executive approval, and difficulties achieving true diversity across disciplines, geographies, and cultural perspectives. Additional barriers were mentioned such as language differences, differing cultural attitudes toward EDI, and logistical challenges in extreme field environments that limit accessibility for disabled or marginalised researchers. Lessons drawn from this experience included the importance of addressing gender beyond binary categories, strengthening cross-cultural collaboration, adapting approaches to local contexts, and ensuring continuous monitoring and evaluation of progress to sustain inclusion in Antarctic research.

From EDI Strategy to organisational impact: Conditions for meaningful change

It was noted that while much progress has been made in increasing diversity and expanding consultation processes, a focus on numbers alone often fails to create meaningful inclusion. In scientific and policy contexts, whose knowledge is heard, trusted, and credited fundamentally shapes evidence, advice, and decision-making. It was stressed that ECRs and marginalized groups may formally participate in committees but often lack sufficient protection, authority, or support, which may result in self-silencing and symbolic participation rather than real influence.

Three major “failure modes” in current EDI practices were identified. First, representation without protection may expose minoritised individuals to increased scrutiny and risk without adequate safeguards. Second, participation without power allows voices to be heard but not acted upon, leaving decision-making concentrated at the top and rendering engagement largely symbolic. Third, responsibilisation shifts institutional responsibilities onto individuals, relying on goodwill and voluntary labor, which may produce invisible work, burnout, and institutionalized inequality. These failure modes were described as illustrating how inclusion without structural support can perpetuate inequities despite surface-level diversity gains.

To address these challenges, it was argued that protection, authority, and recognition should be embedded into EDI initiatives before participation. This includes structural reforms such as vulnerability mapping, accountability mechanisms, sponsorship and credit protection, and upstream integration of EDI into institutional processes rather than downstream corrections. It was highlighted that monitoring should move beyond compliance and numbers to consider who speaks, whose contributions are credited, and who withdraws over time.

Ultimately, it was emphasized that achieving meaningful EDI requires changing institutions, not just people. Redesigning organisational conditions was framed as a preventive approach, positioning EDI as a matter of institutional and governance design rather than a culture or attitudinal issue.

Key discussion points

- Epistemic injustice was identified as an ongoing concern. It was noted that even where individuals from marginalised groups are formally protected and encouraged to speak, their contributions are not always taken up in decision-making due to implicit bias. Beyond creating safe speaking spaces, it was suggested that institutions actively develop practices that strengthen listening, including through active listening training and mechanisms that ensure contributions are meaningfully integrated into outcomes. Examples such as reverse mentoring were presented as ways to institutionalise feedback from early career and marginalised researchers, linking voice directly to structural change rather than symbolic consultation.
- Accessibility of information was identified as a foundational requirement for inclusion, particularly in light of demographic change and legal frameworks such as the Accessibility Act. It was emphasized that discussions and decisions require reliable and relevant data; without adequate data, engagement with certain equality and diversity issues lacks credibility and precision.
- The importance of clearly identifying the problems being addressed in EDI strategies was highlighted. It was discussed that diversity strategies should be grounded in the concrete needs of the people they are intended to support. Reflecting on who the EDI strategy is intended for was seen as necessary. Given the diversity of teams and institutional contexts, it was noted that a single, fully unified strategy may not always be feasible or appropriate and may require tailored approaches.
- It was highlighted that minorities remain minorities within group settings by design and majority-based decision-making processes may therefore marginalise their perspectives. From an organisational science perspective, the inclusion of mechanisms to amplify minority voices in

decision-making was discussed. Institutional design solutions were suggested, such as formal roles having the responsibility for ensuring that minority perspectives are heard. Caution was raised about repeatedly relying on the same individuals to represent minority perspectives, and about the importance of creating inclusive environments where participation does not require individuals to publicly identify with a particular category.

PART 2: Talks on EDI-related cross-cutting themes and breakout discussions

Ensuring inclusive participation and balanced power dynamics in expert groups

It was noted that while many organisations have made progress in identifying and inviting diverse participants, inclusive participation does not automatically follow from representation alone. True inclusion was described as depending on whether participants can frame problems, shape deliberations and affect decisions. Attention was drawn to often invisible power dynamics, which operate through seniority, disciplinary hierarchies, fluency in institutional language, and established norms that privilege certain voices over others. Cognitive diversity, often invisible, was also identified as an important factor in broadening the range of perspectives and outcomes.

Power imbalances were described as operating at multiple levels within expert groups: (1) structural level: selection processes, seniority hierarchies, disciplinary prestige, and forms of unpaid or unrecognised labour; (2) interactional level: meeting norms, control of language, confidence, and who speaks first or most frequently; and (3) institutional level: agenda-setting authority, control over problem framing, authorship, and decision-making power. These dynamics were characterised as often invisible and normalised, making them difficult to challenge. As a result, even diverse groups may struggle to achieve meaningful engagement.

It was noted that transparent selection processes, while important, are insufficient on their own. Inclusive participation was portrayed as requiring clear role definitions and transparent selection criteria; skilled facilitation with explicit norms around turn-taking and deliberation; multiple modes of contribution (e.g. written input, asynchronous engagement, small-group work) to broaden participation; and recognition and appropriate compensation for relational and EDI-related labour. It was further emphasized that inclusive participation needs to be integrated into routine governance and quality assurance structures, rather than positioned as an add-on, and that sustained investment in time, resources, and institutional commitment are necessary.

Breakout discussion

Key discussion points:

- It was emphasized that inclusive participation extends beyong balanced representation. Practices such as collecting written input before meetings and written reflections afterwards, actively interrupting dominating voices, and creating space for others to contribute were highlighted.
- The normalisation of dissenting views was discussed as healthy and beneficial for the quality of deliberation. Making vulnerability explicit when speaking was suggested as one way to reduce

hierarchy and encourage openness. Epistemic humility was identified as a key value, with participants encouraged to recognise the limits of their own knowledge and remain open to alternative perspectives.

- Chairing style and leadership approach were considered critical to inclusive participation. Small interventions, such as explicitly inviting quieter members to speak, calling out unhelpful dynamics, or managing speaking time, were described as significantly influencing outcomes. Rotating moderation was suggested as a potentially useful practice.
- The term "chair" was discussed as potentially reinforcing hierarchy. Reframing the role as "facilitator" was presented as a way of diluting symbolic power, while acknowledging the responsibility and authority that the role carries. Models where two individuals share leadership (e.g. one focusing on content, one on process and representation) were seen as potentially bringing positive outcomes.
- Time allocation was also discussed as a concrete lever for equality. Drawing on examples from work with Indigenous communities, structured speaking orders (e.g. younger members speaking first, strict time limits for senior members) were presented as mechanisms to foster richer and more innovative discussions.
- Rather than imposing rigid codes of conduct, collaboratively defined principles of engagement (e.g. confidentiality, respectful listening, equal speaking time) were discussed as more effective and more likely to foster ownership and accountability. The chair/facilitator role was considered central to upholding these agreed principles.

Key recommendations

1. Co-develop principles of engagement: At the outset of advisory processes, jointly establish clear principles for participation, including confidentiality, respect for dissent, equitable speaking time, and expectations for listening.
2. Expand input collection: Integrate structured written input before meetings and afterwards. Involve participants in co-developing agendas. Allocate speaking time deliberately, experiment with structured speaking orders, and ensure mechanisms are in place to invite quieter voices into the discussion.
3. Strengthen facilitation capacity: Invest in facilitation skills and potentially develop a practical toolkit for ensuring that everyone is 'seen, heard and acknowledged'.

Intersectionality and diversity in scientific advisory processes

It was emphasized that intersectionality should not be reduced to a synonym for "gender". The concept, originally introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, was described as highlighting how single-category anti-discrimination frameworks may leave certain individuals without protection. Although intersectionality has become widely adopted in European policy discourse, concern was expressed that it is sometimes used as a shorthand in ways that obscure the cumulative effects of multiple, overlapping forms of oppression.

The importance of linking intersectionality more explicitly to anti-discrimination law was highlighted, notably in light of the EU's General Act on Equal Treatment and related national legislation. Commonly used categories in anti-discrimination law (gender, age, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, race, disability) were described as important but incomplete. Particular attention was drawn to the relative absence of class in contemporary intersectional analyses despite persistent differences in educational achievement across Europe (e.g. roughly 50% tertiary graduation in Ireland versus about 31% in Germany). It was noted that inequality is historically labelled and produced, and that overlooking categories such as class may mask how power, dominance, exploitation and oppression are distributed.

It was further observed that discrimination operates differently depending on intersecting identity markers. EDI work was framed as requiring close attention to how discrimination affects people in specific contexts, with intersectionality serving as an analytical tool to reveal these dynamics, rather than as a catch-all label that replaces careful, category-sensitive analysis.

Breakout discussion

Key discussion points and recommendations:

- Explicitly request diversity in nominations: When requesting nominations from academies, clearly state that SAPEA seeks a diverse pool of candidates. Include a standard phrase in all requests specifying the types of diversity expected. Avoid assuming that academies will automatically nominate diverse candidates; make diversity an explicit criterion.
- Reject non-compliant nominations: Do not accept nominations that fail to meet the diversity expectations and return such nominations to the nominating academies with clear feedback on why they do not meet SAPEA's diversity requirements. Provide guidance or examples to help academies improve future nominations.
- Use SAPEA's influence to encourage systemic change: The more SAPEA emphasizes diversity, the more academies will adjust their internal procedures, recognizing that participation in SAPEA allows direct contribution to European policy-making.
- Consider cultural and regional differences: Be aware that academic structures vary across Europe (e.g., Eastern vs. Western European models). Adapt expectations and communication to reflect these differences while maintaining SAPEA's diversity standards.

Monitoring, learning, and continuous EDI improvement

It was noted that representation-based approaches to EDI have limitations, and that numerical balance does not automatically translate into influence or power. While representation may improve on paper, informal hierarchies and speaking dynamics often remain unchanged.

Observations from interviews highlighted that both men and women often claim to be "gender neutral", saying they do not see gender, race, or other differences as relevant. However, deeper discussion revealed contrasting perspectives. Many men framed gender as irrelevant, because they focused only on competence or cited balanced headcounts as evidence of equality. In contrast, many women described direct experiences of inequality, including sexist behaviour, unequal expectations, and having their

achievements questioned. This dynamic is described as “eyes wide shut”: women are tired of experiencing inequality, while men are tired of hearing about it. Although numerical representation has improved, these findings suggest that it can potentially function as a shield: institutions can claim progress while avoiding deeper scrutiny of influence, authorship, credibility and decision-making power. It was also noted that gender equality plans, though formally required (e.g. for Horizon Europe participation), often become compliance tools focused on measurable targets rather than structural change.

It was emphasized that monitoring should move beyond counting presence to examining participation and influence. A three-layer framework was proposed: presence (who is in the room), participation (who speaks and contributes), and impact (whose contributions shape outputs and decisions). Focusing only on the first layer risks reinforcing the status quo. EDI was described as a quality standard linked to the quality of science itself, requiring systematic monitoring, reflection and adjustment. A central consideration raised was whether institutions seek improved optics through numerical targets or genuine equality that strengthens voice, working conditions and the production of better science.

Breakout discussion

Key discussion points:

- It was discussed that monitoring should go beyond high-level indicators and also consider methodological diversity, different uses of science, and deeper analytical aspects. Particular attention was highlighted for early-career and young researchers, whose challenges require careful attention and active listening.
- It was emphasized that selection should not rely solely on interviews. More systematic and data-driven approaches, including mathematical methods, were proposed to help identify the most suitable candidates. The concept of the “academic wheel of privilege” was referenced to help highlight less visible issues (e.g., authorship order, visibility) and to amplify underrepresented voices. This perspective can help ensure that less dominant voices are better represented. These considerations relate specifically to recruitment practices and not to monitoring.
- Current monitoring practices were described as largely limited to surface-level indicators such as geography, gender, and language. It was argued that once equal opportunities are ensured, monitoring should move beyond visible characteristics to consider cognitive skills and professional networks, including whether individuals come from high-resource or low-resource environments.
- Qualitative indicators were highlighted as critical for assessing whether voices within a Working Group are truly equal since EDI measurement is often reduced to counting numbers and surface-level representation.
- Diversity management was described as encompassing two main dimensions: the wellbeing of participants and whether the intended objectives are actually achieved. To design a meaningful qualitative EDI framework, it was suggested that at least nine different profiles may be needed.
- Anonymous surveys were proposed as a tool to capture less visible aspects of diversity within groups. It was noted that refusal to participate in EDI surveys may itself indicate meaningful insights, reflecting uncertainty, mistrust, or lack of clarity around the concept. Training was

discussed as a means to address perceptions of EDI as abstract or unclear. Existing ISO standards on EDI, such as one published in Latvia, were mentioned as potentially useful references.

Key recommendations:

- Enhance training and awareness: Training sessions should be provided for Working Groups on how to work together effectively, as well as on transition or exit paths between groups.
- Appoint an "active EDI observer": This would be a dedicated role responsible for safeguarding diversity within each group and ensuring that all members are respected and adequately represented in the Working Group's work.
- Going beyond identity-based characteristics alone: Professional experience, knowledge areas, and academic backgrounds must also be diverse; otherwise, the quality of the outcomes may be compromised. These professional and academic dimensions should be linked with identity indicators such as gender and language in order to monitor EDI more effectively. In this context, age in academia should be measured based on career stage, specifically years since PhD rather than biological age.

Conclusions and next steps

The workshop generated a significant exchange of experience, practical examples, and strategic reflections. Participants shared both concrete EDI implementation practices and broader principles to guide the SAPEA EDI strategy, and discussions helped translate values and ideas into more actionable elements for the future strategy.

There was a strong sense of openness, mutual learning, and constructive engagement, with the collective input providing a strong foundation for developing a meaningful and impactful SAPEA EDI strategy.

Next steps

- **Resource sharing:** Participants are invited to share additional relevant resources. Materials have been uploaded to a shared folder for collective reference: Workshop resources
- **Online follow-up**: An online follow-up meeting may be organised to discuss the draft strategy, seek additional feedback, and/or clarify implementation questions. This will depend on the time available for consultation.
- **Drafting the EDI Strategy:** A draft SAPEA EDI strategy will be developed based on workshop contributions. The draft may be circulated for external review to ensure it accurately reflects participants' input and is useful both for SAPEA and beyond.
- **External workshop:** The draft strategy (or its progress) will be presented at the upcoming Warsaw event. Participants will be informed and invited to engage where possible. Further details about the event are available here: https://scientificadvice.eu/events/20697/