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EQUINET– European Network of Equality Bodies

External Technical Evaluation of 2012 Activities

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February 2013



1. Executive Summary

This report concludes that EQUINET is currently in a very strong position strategically and in terms of performance, enjoying a high reputation for supporting members and in engaging with European Union institutions and with the EU level NGO community. The report identifies four secrets of its success and five challenges that its board and membership should consider addressing for the next strategic planning round, due to commence in late 2013.

The evidence for our conclusions can be summarised against the current PROGRESS logframe criteria in Table 1.

Figure 1: Logframe Evaluation Criteria and Sources of Evidence in this Report

Logic Model Element	Evidence in this Report
Output 1: Relevant advocacy, institutional and capacity building work	The data in Section 3 on Purpose & Direction indicate a clear and supported strategic direction; that Section's paragraphs on Service Delivery and Quality show quality and impact of events and, later in the paragraphs on leadership and governance, on statutory meetings.
Output 2: Accurate monitoring/assessment reports on implementation & impact of EU law & policy	Scores on timeliness, accuracy and usefulness are in Section 3's paragraphs on Service Delivery and Quality.
Output 3: Accurate position/policy papers and analysis;	Scores on timeliness, accuracy and usefulness are in Section 3's paragraphs on Service Delivery and Quality.
Output 4: Identification of good practices;	Scores on timeliness, accuracy and usefulness are in Section 3's paragraphs on Service Delivery and Quality.
Output 4: Information, awareness-raising and campaigning activities, networking with national members organisations and other stakeholders	Section 3's data on the effectiveness of EQUINET's EU engagement and the timeliness, accuracy and usefulness of that engagement provide the evidence on this output.
Immediate Outcome 1: Improving the organisational capacity and management of European networks	The data in Section 3 on EQUINET's plan, the involvement of members in the planning process and the view, later in that section on the relevance of EQUINET's current range of services supports a positive assessment of this outcome.
Immediate Outcome 2: Voicing the concerns and expectations of people exposed to social exclusion, discrimination and gender inequality (and formulating them to inform and influence policy making at national and EU levels	EQUINET works through its members and in the view of its members, satisfaction (Section 3's paragraphs on representivity and the 'health' of the Network of members support a positive assessment of this Outcome. EQUINET's partnership with the Gender Equality Network is further evidence of achievement and deeper reach. The EU engagement scores, mentioned under Output 4 are also relevant here.

Logic Model Element	Evidence in this Report
<p>Immediate Outcome 3: Reinforcing the skills of the networks and its members' organisations to advance, support and further develop EU objectives and priorities at national level</p>	<p>Members are very content with EQUINET's engagement at the EU level, as previously quoted, and they are also very happy with its impact on them who have impact in their own countries within the scope and parameters of national equality legislation.</p>
<p>Immediate Outcome 4: Better integrating of cross-cutting issues (e.g. gender, poverty and non-discrimination)</p>	<p>EQUINET's partnership with the Gender Equality Network is further evidence of a more coordinated approach, but its existing methodology thematic learning events to share the experience and develop the skills of members agencies' staff promotes an integrated approach.</p>

2. Introduction

This report

This report represents the findings and conclusions of an external evaluation consultancy carried out by Transform Management Consultancy and commissioned by EQUINET of its activities during 2012 for its key funding stream, PROGRESS, a fund of the European Commission's DG Justice.

Evaluation Objective

While EQUINET's Call for Proposals made clear that the proposed technical evaluation was to fulfil the requirements for evaluation under the terms of its PROGRESS funding, it also outlined certain areas of specific interest that the final report should, *inter alia*, consider:

- Assess key management processes, including and especially planning processes and the current institutional structure
- Review the effectiveness of service delivery by EQUINET to its (37) members, including information provision
- Assess EQUINET's efforts to strengthen the network

EQUINET'S intention was that the evaluation report would assess these areas of interest and make appropriate recommendations for the future.

EQUINET

Since 2007, EQUINET has been legally established as an international not-for-profit association (Aisbl) with a Secretariat based in Brussels. EQUINET has been funded through the European Commission's PROGRESS programme, whose objective is to strengthen the EU's contribution in supporting Member States' commitments and efforts to create more and better jobs and to build a more cohesive society.

EQUINET's 2011-2014 strategic plan has the following key four objectives:

- 1) Enhance the skills and capacities of the staff of the equality bodies.
- 2) Enhance the strategic capacity of the equality bodies.
- 3) Identify and communicate the learning from the work of national equality bodies.
- 4) Enhance the recognition and strategic positioning of Equinet and member equality bodies with all stakeholders at European Union level.

While the plan still has over a year to run, the board's thoughts are beginning to turn to developing the next plan. This report may help in some way to provide reflection on the execution of that plan as well as to point to challenges that it may need to address for the next plan period, as well as reporting on PROGRESS funding.

PROGRESS Funding Requirements

Assessment of EQUINET's success in fulfilling the requirement of its grant under PROGRESS requires the development of a logframe, conforming to the overall PROGRESS logframe. In this case, EQUINET has adopted five Outputs and four Immediate Outcomes, each of which has its performance measures. Some, but not all, of these performance measures require the input of an external evaluation (ie this evaluation report).

The methodology behind the survey for this evaluation, our assessment of EQUINET's documentation as listed in the Appendix and our meeting with EQUINET's (member and staff) personnel was designed to assess these performance measures while offering EQUINET an overall assessment of its strategic position.

Factors informing our Approach

Organisations of a similar nature and working in a similar way to EQUINET share certain characteristics that inform our approach to this technical evaluation.

Membership organisations, interlocutory organisations and supra-national organisations are all inherently complex to manage – and EQUINET is all three!

Typically for **membership organisations**, there is a tension on the one hand, between representation and using democratic approaches to decision making and, on the other hand, arriving at efficient means by which to direct and control the organisation's actions. Dysfunction can occur either when the need for full consultation slows effective executive action, or when overly hasty management action undermines proper accountability by the governing bodies. In our experience, membership organisations have to arrive at their own unique approach to managing this tension in order to develop more appropriate decision-making processes.

Interlocutory organisations are also complex to manage. Simultaneously meeting the needs of member bodies for information, support, etc, while also meeting the needs of the major funders, such as the European Commission, for a high level of credible political insight can be problematic. Given limited resources, it is easy for both parties to feel dissatisfied without careful stakeholder management.

A further challenge arises from this. It is inherently difficult for organisations such as EQUINET to demonstrate the impact that its work. Attributing a change (for example in policy) to EQUINET's efforts is not easy unless those affected by EQUINET's work admit to its influence. This problem impinges directly upon the thinking behind the proposed methodology: EQUINET's reputation amongst key stakeholders can be used as proxy indicators for impact¹.

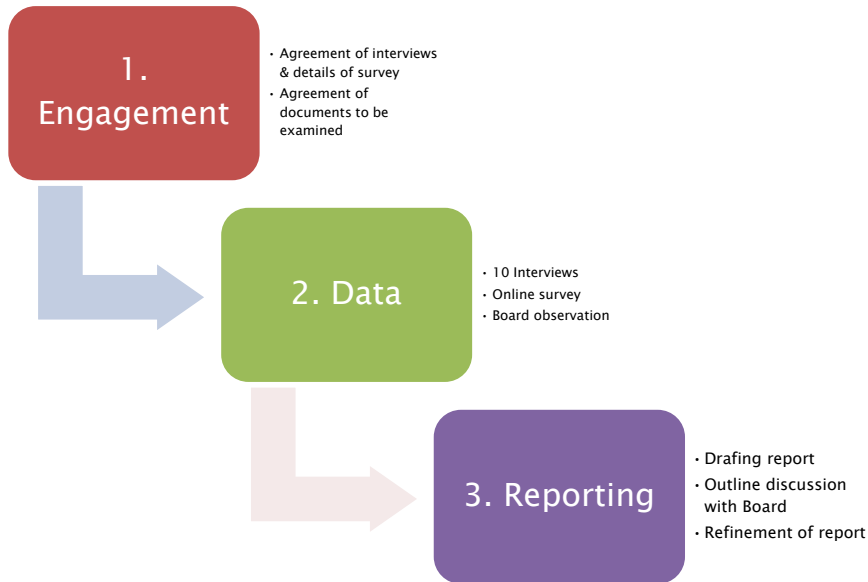
Supranational organisations are complex to manage because their 'reach' is so broad. The reality of geography, national and managerial culture differences, as well as language, make the basic running of the organisation and all its interactions more complex. The wide range of political interests of each of its members will also create an essential tension in the sense of pleasing one member or group of members may lead to the displeasure of others.

¹ Burns, S (2000) *Outcome monitoring* Charities Evaluation Services, UK

Method

The agreed method for the evaluation comprised three stages (Table 1).

Table 1: Outline Method – Three Stages



In slightly more detail, this process involved the following **key activities**:

A. Stage 1: Engagement

- Review all documentation provided by the client, including relevant planning, funding, internal and external reports, etc
- Agreement of interview protocol and short survey with Acting Director

B. Data

- Preparation for and input to a briefing session to the staff and Executive Board, including the observation of one board meeting²
- Administration of a short survey on perceptions of effectiveness and impact to each of EQUINET members
- Interviews with a small number of key external stakeholders and key staff members by telephone and in person (8 planned, 10 carried out, plus write-ups)

C. Reporting

- Analysis of data and preparation of a narrative report for discussion with the Executive Director and dissemination for consultation to the Executive board
- Final revisions to report, with recommendations, for presentation to PROGRESS

The process started in December 2012, with the survey completed by early January and the report completed by early February 2013.

² Due to severe weather conditions and cancelled flights, the board meeting was cancelled at short notice

Questions asked in the Survey and Interviews

Both the online survey and the interviews had the same structure of questions, covering four topics:

1. EQUINET's purpose or direction
2. Service delivery or quality
3. Governance and leadership
4. The health of the Network

Online Survey

There were 67 responses to the online questionnaire which was sent to EQUINET's members and a sample of other stakeholders. Most EU and accession states were represented in the responses, along with a number OF voices from EU level institutions and a few NGOs. The organisations which contributed to the survey are listed in Appendix A.

Interviews

Eleven interviews were carried out, following a pre-agreed interview protocol, with a selection of eight members from eight jurisdictions and four members of EQUINET staff team.

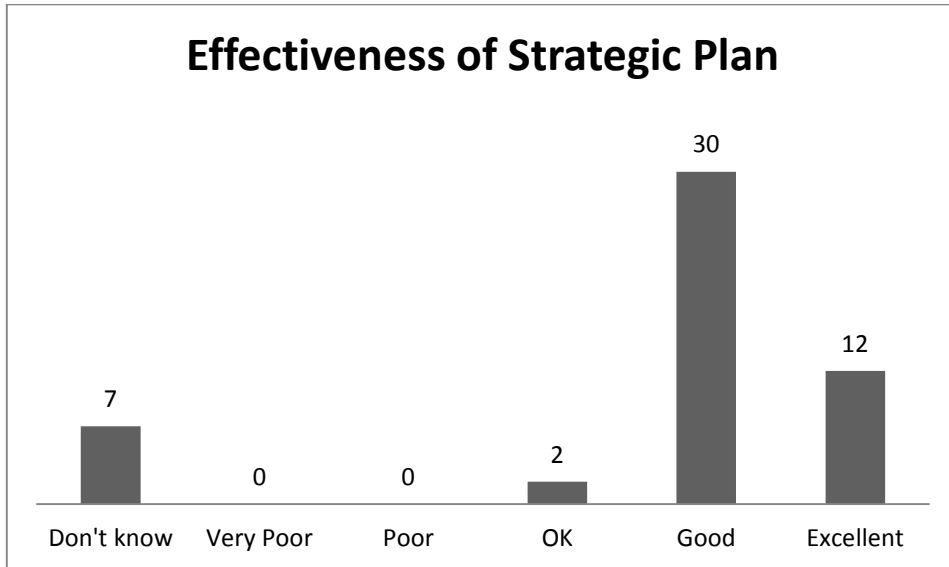
3. Data

Introduction

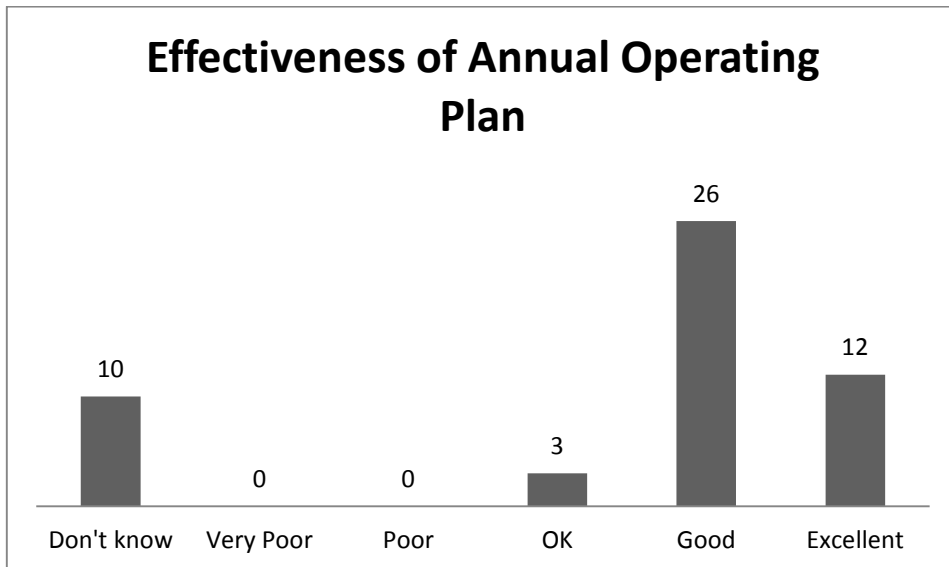
The presentation of the data follows the structure of the survey (and interview protocol) in terms of topics and questions within each topic. Conclusions are drawn later in the report.

EQUINET's purpose or direction

How effective is EQUINET's Strategic Plan to provide the network and the Secretariat with clarity of direction?



How effective are EQUINET's Annual Operating Plans to operationalise the strategic plan into an annual action plan?

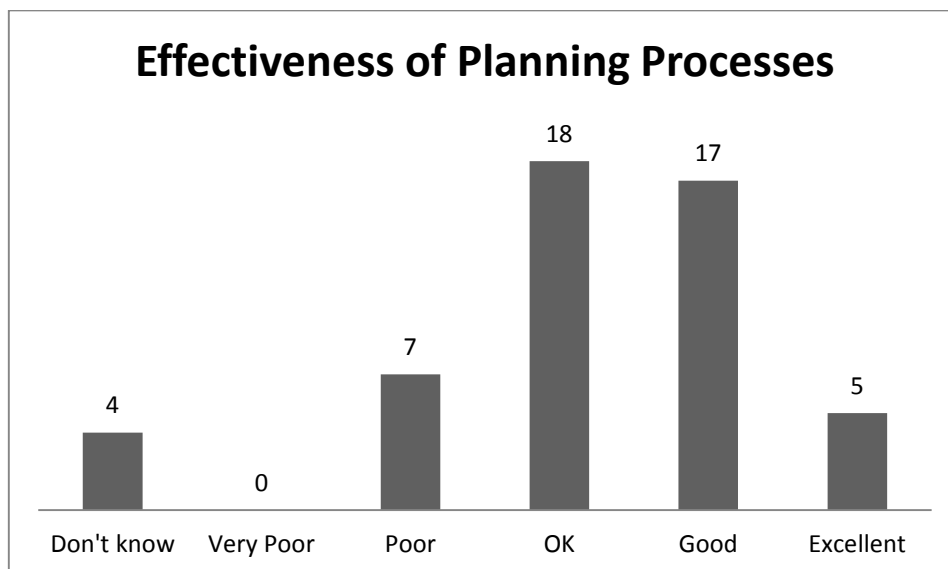


Interview comments on the plans

- The plans provide the right direction for EQUINET
- Of course, there wasn't a plan originally and the direction wasn't too clearly expressed, but now the plans are very clear and we all understand the direction – and support it
- The plan is needed to record the direction the members want and have agreed; it also gives clear direction to what staff do every day
- Clear plans and the actions are tied in to the plans closely

- Plans incorporate the common and the diverse needs of members well although at time it can be hard to ensure we meet all the diverse needs of all members
- Very effective from my point of view and although I don't have other experience of similar plans, it seems clear and strong
- I use it and refer to it
- Perhaps too long but at least it's clear
- The strategy helps us demonstrate our independence
- The pillars are a great way of communicating what we are about and what we do and the pillars remain relevant
- There is sufficient flexibility built in to the Annual Operating Plan to allow us to respond to changing needs and sudden events
- The strategy is built on a strong sense of shared values
- The space EQUINET occupies strategically is unique and necessary; if it weren't there, you'd need to reinvent it!
- It may be helpful to review the direction and perhaps one of the 'legs' is no longer needed?
- Our plans are underpinned by and enable us to live a shared set of values

How appropriate and effective is your involvement in EQUINET's planning processes?



Interview comments on involvement

- This is a fully board-led process, but staff ensure that the right people are fully engaged in consultation
- I have brought back some of the ideas of the planning process into my own organisation: we learn from EQUINET
- Yes, it's a group effort, but it is hard to plan for such diverse needs as the members are quite different. For example, developing common standards for equality bodies is a challenge
- I always feel listened to when I make my comments on the plans, e.g. at the AGM
- It is very powerful for a democracy to organisation (and pay for!) its own criticism

In your personal view, what are the 3–5 key strategic issues facing EQUINET at present?



Examples of the statements made under each heading are as follows:

Strategic Concern of Members	Examples
EU influence/policy role/directives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contributing to the revision of Directives 2000/43/EC and 2000/78/EC Influencing and contributing to equality and non-discrimination discussions and developments on equality and non-discrimination at EU level on various levels (e.g. Legislation, Policies and Funding Programmes) Improving ability to influence EU policy making New anti-discrimination directive Maintaining and continuing to build reputation with key stakeholders – European Commission
Member development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance staff development within equality bodies Responding to the divergent needs of member EBs Provide assistance to National Equality Bodies Strong and independent national equality bodies Peer support to enhance institutional development of equality bodies
Network growth and development/ positioning of EQUINET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The nature and landscape of equality bodies is continuously changing, EQUINET allows and provides support to facilitate information sharing once bodies change their remit/function

Strategic Concern of Members	Examples
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement of international cooperation for the growth and positioning as a network • Clear (and harmonized) mandates for the NEBs
Specific Policy areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple discrimination • LGBT rights • Rise in racism due to economic crisis • Religious freedom • Roma issues • People with disabilities
Austerity/ impact of recession on equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recession in much of Europe being used to undermine the case for equality • How to respond to the possible impact of the economic crisis affecting equality bodies • Impact of cuts and mergers on member bodies
Resourcing challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of resources for equality bodies in Europe • Assistance to members facing substantial budget cuts • Fundraising
Legal /practice standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common standards for EBs • Key player in strengthening standards for equality bodies
Gender mainstreaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting up a solid and relevant Gender Network & main streaming Gender • Incorporation of the work of the gender equality network • Gender based discrimination in employment field
Communications/Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working on communications strategies and activities • Limited awareness by general public about equality bodies • Promotion activities and its publications

Interview comments

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The increasingly negative operating environment in relation to minorities and to action against discrimination • Effective incorporation of the work of the gender equality network • Growth, not stagnation - becoming ever more relevant |
|--|

- Longer term financial sustainability of EQUINET
- Avoiding the danger of a loss of visibility
- Ensuring we have sufficient funds to do what we need to do – and supporting the case for better funding of members
- We are too dependent on the EC for funding and that means that we are not truly independent
- Fragility of the secretariat in terms of loss of any key people: not sure succession planning is being addressed
- The fragility of some of our members

To what extent is EQUINET well positioned to respond to these key strategic issues?



Interview comments

- Yes, EQUINET is very well positioned to embrace and work with these challenges
- EQUINET is constrained by what is permitted in its funding and the amount of that funding that cap work activity
- EQUINET needs to position itself very carefully in relation to its key stakeholders

Comments or suggestions on the questions on Direction and purpose of EQUINET?

- Need a reflexion training [on our strategic] priorities
- There are serious challenges in responding to the key strategic issues. EQUINET can play an important role but the involvement of other actors is [also] needed
- On-going sharing of good practice and dissemination of information are very important
- We (equality bodies and civil society) need to coordinate further to ensure that we bring back equality on the agenda. EQUINET could also coordinate with civil society when the independence / effectiveness of equality bodies is challenged. Together we can respond to such issues immediately and hopefully help turn the tide

Interview question on how the strategic direction of the organisation should evolve for the next planning period (2015–18)

- It would be hard to drop any of our existing activities
- We may need to alter direction a little in the next strategic planning round to give even greater focus
- Should drop one of the four pillars in the next planning round

- The board has to take these ideas up and weave them into the next strategic planning round – we need to carry out some studies to inform the next plan
- The next plan should strengthen the membership and the gaps in membership and it should also focus on ever higher work quality
- The next plan should help members do more with each other
- We need in the next plan to reconsider our messaging about who we are and what we offer...
- ...going in this direction would require more funding from other sources
- Really important for EQUINET to inform (even more) equality policy at the EU level, especially new or revised Directives and strategic litigation work
- We should keep doing what we are doing
- The next plan should be about a careful maturing of the network, steadily developing and refining what we do and who we do it for

Service delivery or quality

What do you understand to be EQUINET 's 3–5 key service offerings?

The survey invited free-text responses and the resulting comments generating four clear areas of service:

- Training
- Peer learning/exchange
- Policy and influence
- Member support/development

Each of these areas is examined in more detail in the questions that followed.

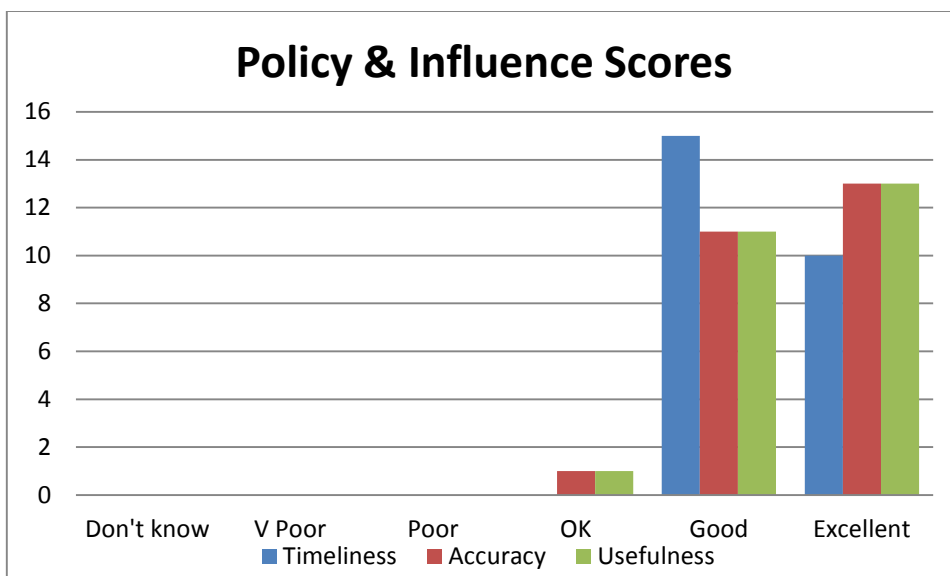
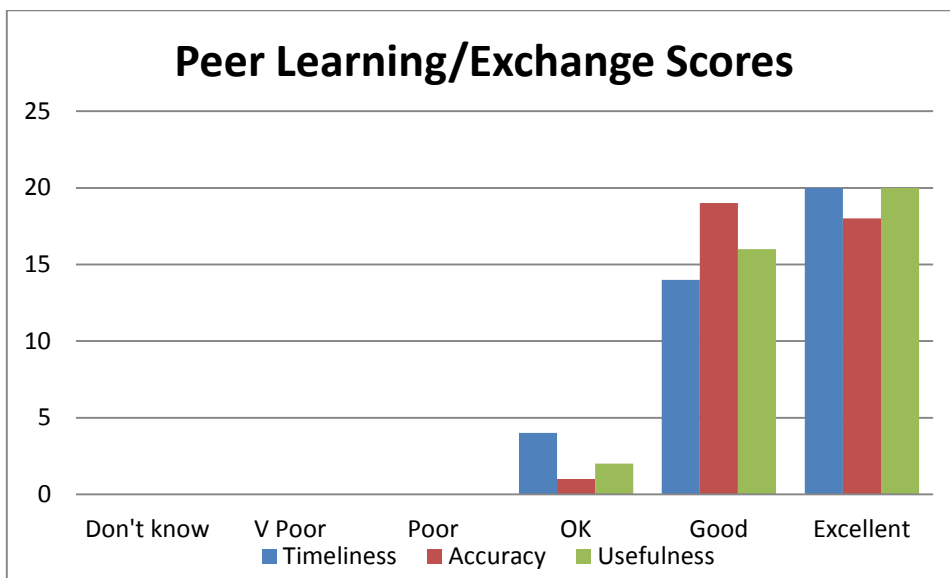
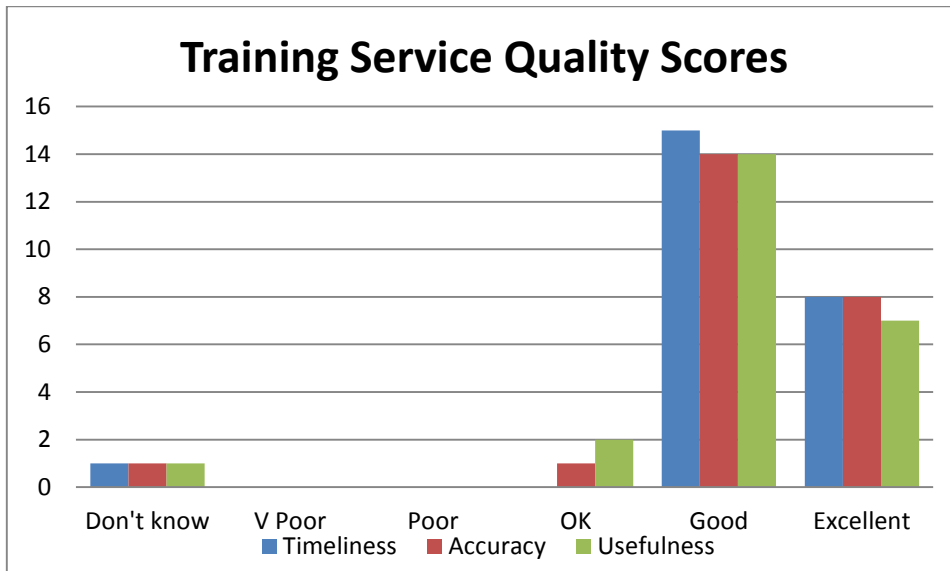
Interview comments

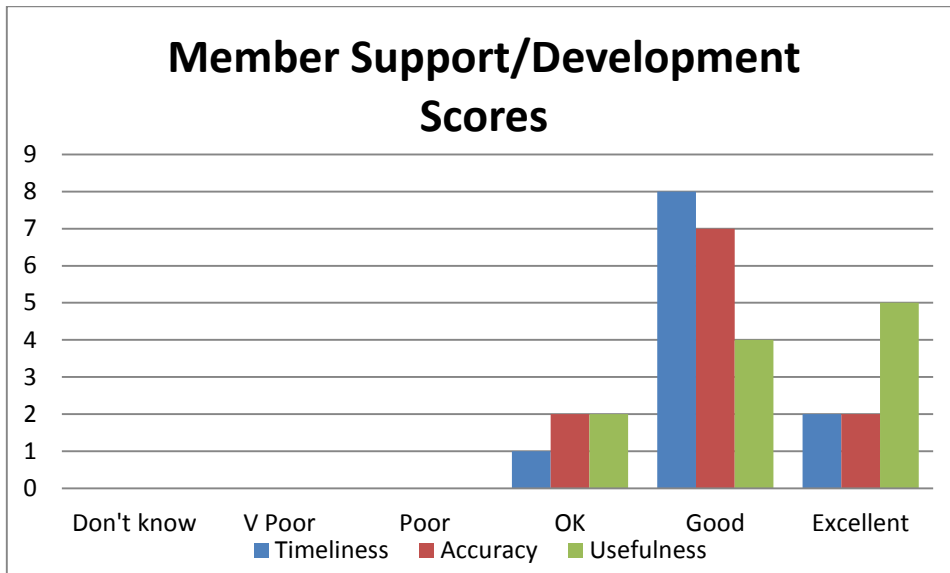
The most frequently mentioned service areas were:

- Training
- Materials and publications
- Solidarity between peers/ peer support
- Working groups
- The website
- Capacity building
- A platform for the exchange of knowledge and experience
- Policy oriented work at the European level

The Commission, as funder, likes to define work quality in terms of its timeliness, the accuracy with which it is executed and how useful the work was. Taking each of the work areas you have listed above, what is your view of their timeliness, accuracy and usefulness, i.e. their quality and impact?

Respondent's free narrative descriptions of the services provided by EQUINET easily clustered into four high-level service offerings, suggesting that the services that EQUINET offers are clear to members/users of the service. The scores to each of these four areas were generally very high as the following chart illustrate.

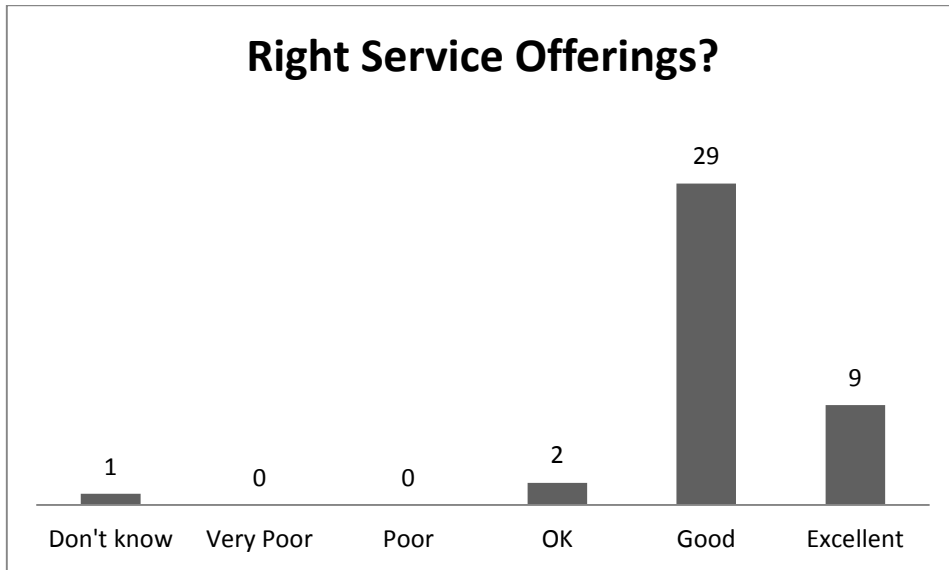




Interview comments

- The services are really great, especially training
- The inputs we receive are indispensable for our work
- Don't know what the impact is for some members
- Members say the services are the ones they want
- Feedback suggests what we do is indeed timely and useful
- The working groups are particularly excellent
- Events are typically very well planned and end up being both useful and (therefore) impactful
- We get top level speaker which really adds to the value of our events
- The formats are very interactive and this enables learning through participation and experience sharing
- There's a real emphasis on values in all our work, eg talking about freedom of speak vs hate speech
- An example of timeliness is the way events are fit around the European Years
- We have to maintain a shared understanding about how we influence policy: we are not an NGO and not a lobbyist in the way they are. We influence by writing about the facts that come from our members
- The web stats show a positive picture
- The feedback we get from DG Justice and FRA is generally very encouraging
- The EQUINET services offer good value for money
- They really get the basics right in terms of preparation and running meetings well
- Events are concise and to the point
- When money is scarce, this is the body we'd joint before all others - we get real value from our membership
- The vicarious contact with EU institutions feels very valuable
- The Board Advisor's contributions as advisor to the Board are valuable

To what extent are these service offerings the right ones to deliver the strategy?



Interview comments

- Need to consult membership to check but yes
- The current services are the one we need

Interview Question: What improvements can you see for the future on the area of service delivery?

- In terms of the accuracy point, there is a question of depth and volume in our work
- We have to develop our ability to monitor work quality with better evaluation tools
- Not sure about value of regional groupings
- The work is timely and accurate, but don't know if it's really useful
- Since we are so tiny, not sure how impactful we can be
- A little more differentiation of services of different membership needs perhaps
- The website could be improved especially in the area of case-law
- Question of staff overload
- Greater support for network development?
- A more 'joined-up' approach to working groups?
- More segmented events for different member needs?
- Depth of publications
- Wonder if trainings should have fewer numbers

Please give a recent example of how EQUINET's service offerings have impacted on your work over the past year.

A few of the examples given:

- EQUINET training inspired the ETA to organize its own training for members/lawyers

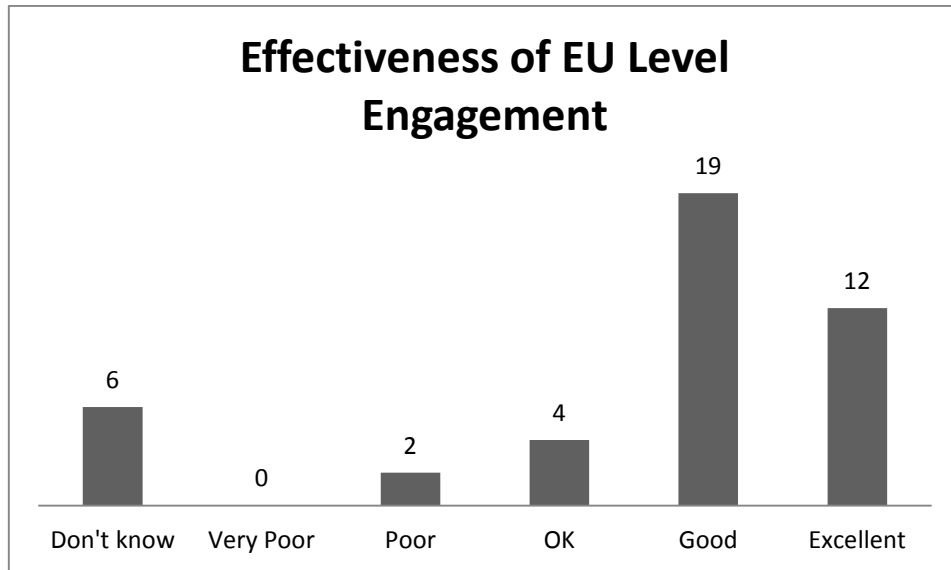
- Intervention in support of the need for a structural change and creation of the real, independent and effective EB (addressed to the key national stakeholders and the EC
- Network event with European Roma Information Office enabled us to gain an understanding of the European-level infrastructure on the situation and experience of Roma
- EC has recommended to member states that they consult EB on the review of the directives
- Recent Perspectives – e.g. on 2012 year of solidarity on ageing; on merger of human rights and equality bodies; and on challenges faced by equality bodies are all helpful to us in our work
- The communication training was very useful for the discussion and development in our equality body; we are trying to adapt the EQUINET strategies and work plan in our institution
- Exchange of information with member EBs at EQUINET meetings and trainings
- Training has improved our work with discrimination cases
- Perspectives on ageism, the results of WGs equality law in practice, communications strategies and strategic development
- My work improves when I share and learn with others in all aspects
- EQUINET is a great institution, where we can take experience from our colleagues; the seminars in 2012 were very useful, especially the seminar in Malta, from which we took back many ideas in our work for 2013, not least the information booklets for children
- EQUINET Training on Under-Reporting helped me to find new ways of combatting underreporting
- Influenced our thinking on interaction with service providers
- They have provided us with great data for our work
- We use the perspectives and the trainings actively in our daily work
- Members of our Professional Service have significantly improved their knowledge and became acquainted with the experiences of other independent bodies. Thanks to that, we get better and better...
- We have provided EQUINET with information for surveys and reports, and provided information concerning legal problems and cases
- Legal training and participating in working groups
- Our Ombudsman has to reflect results of the analysis coming from his involvement in WG Equality Law in Practice (access to public housing of third country nationals), applications of "World Cafe" concept in the events held by Ombudsman Office
- The legal expert seminars always present issues relevant to take into consideration for the ombudsman's work
- Work on mergers has been important in defining new merged role of equality and human rights
- The training has benefitted our staff members in their day-to-day work while through a request for information via EQUINET other equality bodies forwarded their procedures on investigation of complaints on discrimination.
- The training workshop 'Communicating Equality: Effective Communication Strategies for Equality Bodies', in April 2011, helped us a lot to upgrade our internet page and create our Facebook site.
- EQUINET's commitment and consistent call for the adoption of the anti-discrimination directive is very important for the directive to remain on the agenda.

Interview comments

- It does every day, e.g. folder on healthcare
- The Malta training was excellent and helped us in casework management. It was very innovative and looked at values and I've taken a lot back with me to the work back home

- Training on communications – am applying this in my current work with colleagues

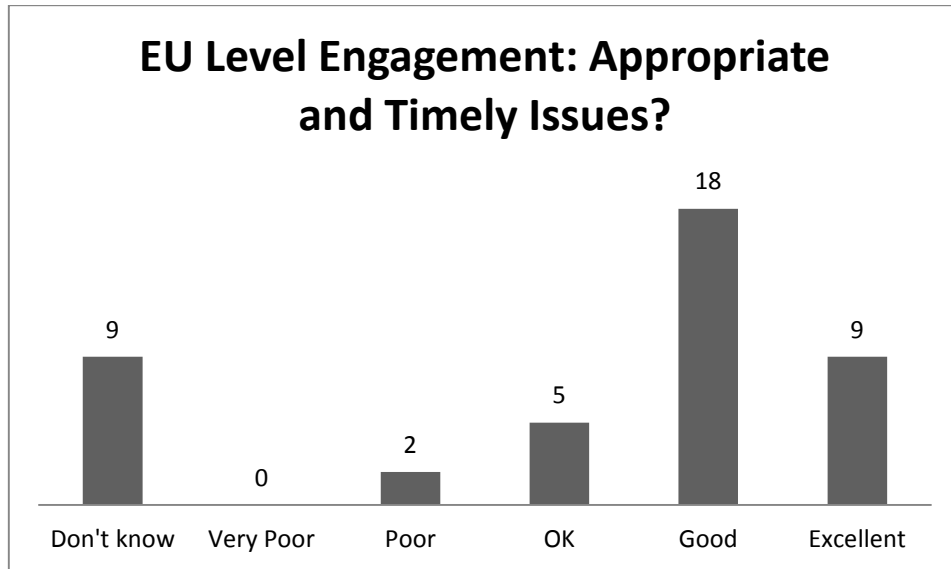
Voice: how effectively has EQUINET engaged with key stakeholders at an EU level?



Interview Comments

- Very good understanding of the main funder and especially a good understanding by the funder of our unique position which is different from NGOs
- Well and the EC acknowledges this
- There's been a huge leap in the last couple of years and we mustn't lose sight of this
- I don't know – perhaps we could be more influential?

Voice: how appropriate and timely were the issues brought forward by EQUINET in engaging with stakeholders at an EU level?



Interview Comments

- We position ourselves well
- There will be a challenge to represent the new EQUINET after the incorporation of the work of the gender network
- Repositioning is required but will need to be done sensitively
- The confusion in some quarters about our identity and that of a civil society organisation is now much better but we need to stay on top of this sensitive positioning with careful and persistent messaging.
- Not sure

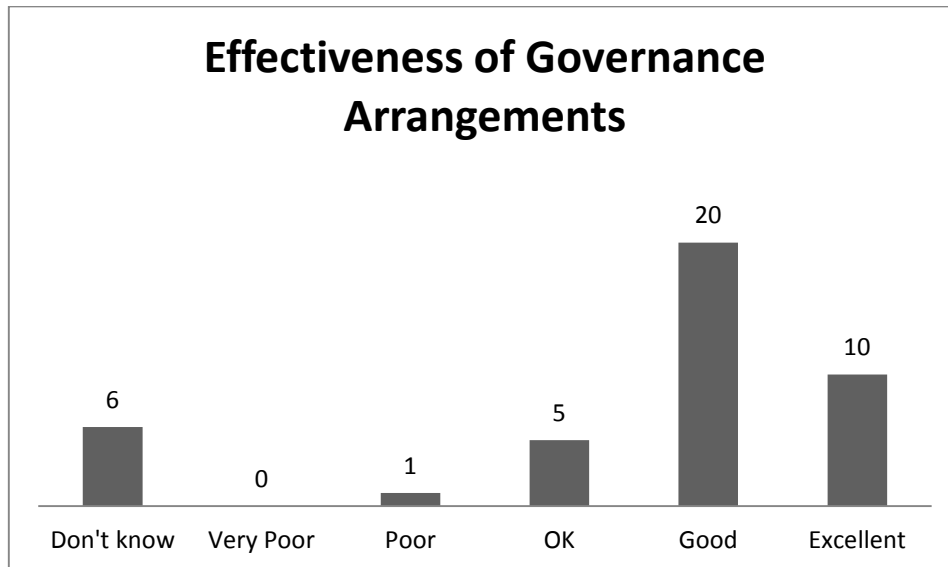
Additional comments or suggestions on any of the service delivery questions?

Just one comment was given:

- A book with a timeline of major achievements in equality in this century.

Governance and leadership

To what extent do EQUINET's current governance arrangements provide the network with the leadership and accountability mechanisms it needs?



Interview comments

- They really are excellent, but they are still missing something which I think is the visibility of the board
- The board is young and may just easily be slightly overly dominated by older members
- It's important that the senior members of the Board understand the powerful impact they can have, even with the best of intentions
- Generally it's a good way for us to function, but we have to watch the slightly worrying unchallenging nature of the AGM and decisions that are taken in unanimity without much discussion.
- We make the right decisions – we do not avoid the decisions we need to make
- Members seem to be well informed as to the issues for EQUINET
- The current arrangements are effective ways of making decisions and keeping the membership informed about what's going on
- We've been lucky to have had a good board three times in a row
- Excellent – transparent and fair; they practice the values the organisation preaches!
- The leadership is collective
- The board is very supportive
- Board has been effective at putting new ideas on the table
- The board seems to stick to our primary purpose well.
- It's enjoyable to be part of this board
- The regions from which board members are elected are somewhat arbitrary

To what extent do the Secretariat's management structures provide the network with the leadership and delivery capacity it needs?



Interview comments

- They deliver!
- Hard-working and committed
- Astounding output given the limited number of staff to do things
- The staff is not there for leadership – that's the board's job – do deliver what the board has agreed and they do this very well
- Gold stars: great group of people delivering really well, always available and willing
- All the staff have been selected very well indeed
- There is a capacity challenge and there is a sustainability challenge
- Very vulnerable to loss of staff, especially senior staff
- Quality has not dipped when staff were away

Comments or suggestions on the governance and leadership questions?

A very hard working and committed staff make the Network the success that it is and the staff are a pleasure to work with

EQUINET is on a good track; nevertheless it will be a challenge to continue the good work and to meet the needs of the different Equality Bodies

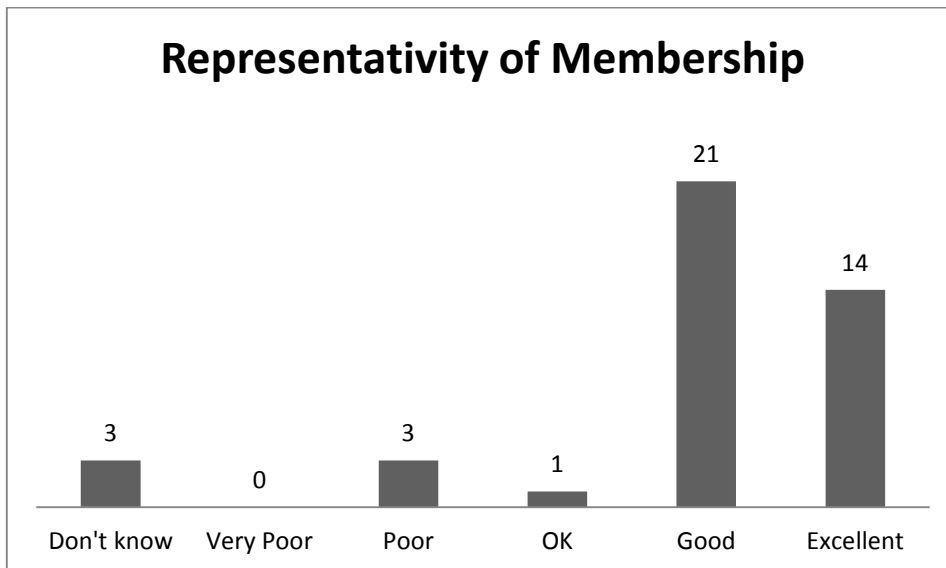
The resources of the Secretariat need to be increased

We are over all quite positive with both the board and the secretariat. They work very hard, especially the secretariat. We think though that for the workload and the budget allocated that the secretariat is understaffed

EQUINET would benefit from an increase of staff members if this was at all possible

The health of the Network

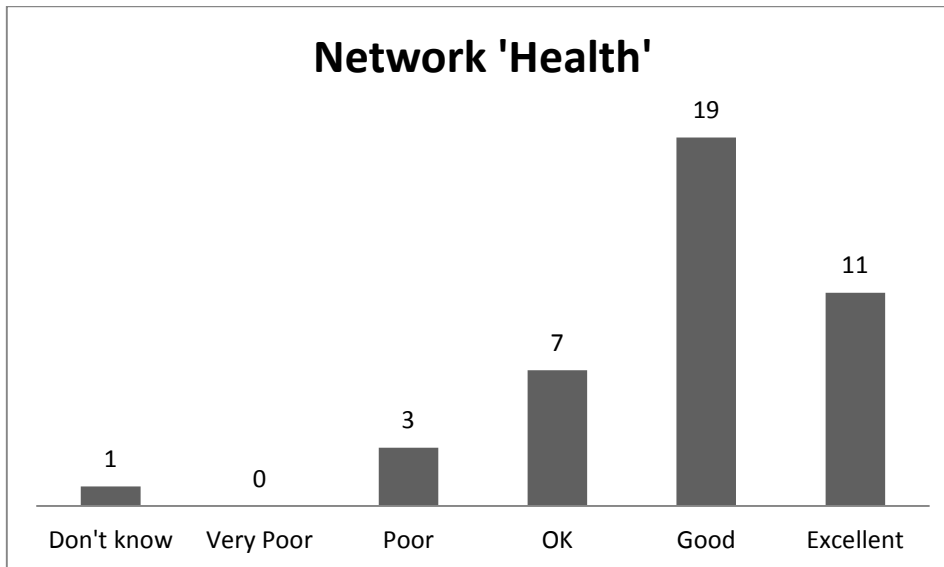
Representativity: to what extent does the network have in membership all the organisations it should have?



Interview comments

- There are perhaps a couple of organisations we should have in membership but basically we have all the members there should be, more or less
- There are a few organisations in Eastern Europe that we should recruit
- There are some gaps and we need to fill them

To what extent is the network a healthy one: members are well informed, engaged in the issues, actively networking and working effectively in their respective jurisdictions?



Interview comments

There are roughly four segments of the membership, each of which has different needs and aspirations: the established 'power-players', contributors, the learners and the disengaged. These segments are of course not precisely defined, but they do enable the organisation to think about how it addresses the different needs of its membership:

- With the 'Power-players', the question is: how to keep them interested and engaged
- With the 'Contributors', it's about how to feed them longer term
- With the 'Learners', it's about thinking about the trajectory of their needs
- With the 'Disengaged', it's about how to involve them more
- Yes, it is healthy. There are obstacles, not least language
 - The key strength is that it's a very active network and relationships are positive - that's the real sign of 'health'
 - A sign of health is that the network is not mediated in a top-down way: there are top down, bottom up and horizontal communications. Indeed, arguably the Secretariat comes second to the inter-member communication
 - The challenge is expanding the number of people in each organisation who are actively engaged and the organisation-members who are not so engaged. While there are plenty of good people who are involved, we need more to achieve real impact in each member
 - Network strength can vary according to region. For example, there are quite active communications amongst the members from the Northwest, but less, I think amongst those from the South and East. Great sustainability of the network will come from the greater engagement of these members both with each other and with the rest of the network
 - Some members seem quite timid and there is a question about how their confidence can be built to facilitate more active contributions and greater challenge

Interview question: what are the next steps for the development of network capacity and health?

- Segment services more
- Focus on capacity building to facilitate higher levels of engagement in the South and East in particular
- Address confidence and, if possible, linguistic limitations of members
- Fill the remaining gaps in membership

- Higher levels of member penetration: engage a larger number of members' staff in the activities of EQUINET
- Leverage power of network more for greater influence on the EU policy direction
- We are still transitioning from being a project to becoming an organisation and that trajectory must continue
- The sustainability of the network is the key thing
- There needs also to be a forum to enable more of the senior people in each member organisation to meet

Comments or suggestions on any of the Network questions?

A number of comments were made by respondents, including:

There is an inconsistency in the membership: quasi-judicial bodies in some states are members but not their counterparts in other member states
There is a need to consider links or membership with sub-national equality bodies, such as the Länder equality bodies in Germany or Austria
The network gives enough opportunity to bring and take information, inspiration and lobby opportunity for both large, strong and established organizations and for small and starting organizations. But it is a very fragile and sensitive balance, so the Board and secretariat should keep very alert to this question. Until now the result is quite satisfactory
I consider EQUINET to be a model of good practice as a network of member organisations
The trainings and seminars are well-accepted. The AGM is well attended. The members of the working groups are more involved than others. The website (forum) could be used more, but perhaps the claim is still too high
The legal focus is too big compared to the process of changing mind-set
The network suffers from the fact that members have limited resources to dedicate to the work of EQUINET
Great network of equality bodies, with committed staff in the Secretariat. Keep up the good work!
Good communication and cooperation between FRA, NHRIs and EQUINET
One thing I'm uncertain about is to what extent the members have much contact outside the formal meetings.
The network seems at membership level to be a 'club' and have insiders and outsiders. It does not welcome new members and speaks principally to like-minded individuals. A lot of the business is done in an amateur manner though this has improved over the years. A fresh view would refresh the network, but it is a closed shop in many ways

4. Analysis

Introduction

It was noted in the introduction to this report that organisations that are based on membership, on multi-national operations and on working to influence policy are inherently challenging to lead well. The evidence of this review points to the inevitable conclusion that EQUINET does these things very well indeed. The questions then arise:

- How is this so? What does EQUINET have to learn – and potentially to teach others?
- What might the next phase of its development be like and what does it need to do to get there?

To answer the first question, one needs to review what the data presented in the previous section amounts to, drawing overall conclusions. To answer the second question, the data in the review also gives some hints and suggestions, which we will summarise in a further section.

EQUINET has a clear direction – and is well positioned for its future

One of the key findings of the questions about strategic and operational direction is the clarity and simplicity of the strategic message. But this clarity and simplicity is not merely clever phrasing and good PR, it sits on a process that respondents felt was involving, engaging and inclusive. In other words, the strategy has a strong sense of being ‘ours’ (ie the members, supported by the Secretariat) and not ‘theirs’ (i.e. the Board and/or Secretariat’s doing things to the members). This collective underpinning of the strategy is the key to its success and it is in turn underpinned by the view that there is a profound shared community of interest between members. The idea of a strong community of interest is often expressed in the case of EU-level networks but it can sometimes be more of an intellectual idea than a truly felt reality. In this case, it seems to be both. So, while the strategy is effective, clearly written and derives from a robust and inclusive process, there are certain preconditions of good strategy that were already in place: the sense of a shared community with, to an extent, a sense of a shared origin (European as well as national law) as well as destiny (we are more likely to secure the future of our work together rather than apart, and learn from each other on the way).

Recognising these gains, there are pointers in the data about the next strategic planning round, foreshadowed at the last AGM:

- 1) While the scores for the question on the planning process are high, the modal score is ‘OK’ rather than ‘good’ or ‘excellent and comment point to the need to keep working at the question of inclusion, given the very diverse needs to members and the ease with which the more experienced or senior representatives can easily and unconsciously overshadow their more junior or younger or new members.
- 2) The message about focus is worthy of comment, not least because there is a range of views on the subject: for some, the current range of activities should remain, while for others, there should be greater focus to have higher impact on fewer things, not least in a more adverse operating environment.
- 3) Three of the nine strategic issues identified by respondents dominate: first, EQUINET’s policy and interlocutory role with EU institutions, then its work to facilitate the development of members

and thirdly, its role to position and develop the network itself and the data includes comments about what should be thought about in these areas

4) While there is no doubt that members consider EQUINET to be well positioned to meet the challenges ahead, the constraints to growth associated with its single source of funding come to the fore for some, while for others that single source is a source of security and not a symbol of constraint.

5) The successful incorporation of the former Network of Gender Equality Bodies is something that will take time to effect and will need energy and sensitivity to ensure the development of a new, larger organisation.

Overall, while taking these points into consideration, the view is that the next phase of EQUINET's development will be about 'careful maturing' of the network, continuing the process of mutual association, learning, engagement and influence.

Service Quality is very high

Respondents were invited to identify and then rate the quality of the services provided by EQUINET. Respondents' views easily clustered around four areas: training, Peer learning/ exchange, policy and influence and member support/ development. Each of these four areas received high scores using the service quality scoring approach required for PROGRESS funding evaluations: timeliness, accuracy and usefulness. While all are high the highest score (mode = 'excellent') is for peer learning/ exchange, quickly followed by policy and influence scores (mode = 'good').

There is also little doubt that these service offerings are the right ones and comments attest to this. Where there are comments for further reflection, ideas around segmenting services better to serve the very diverse needs of members and the depth currently possible amongst research and publications are worthy of merit.

In surveys such as the one for this evaluation, questions to elicit specific examples of services that have had genuine impact can be hard to answer. This was not the case for this evaluation. Specific examples of trainings were offered as were involvement at EU policy level, not least the reporting by the European Commission on the application of the equality Directives and the influence of the actions, ideas and behaviours of members and their staff.

EQUINET's ability to get across its unique positioning neither as an NGO, nor as a dependent public sector body but as a publically funded independent network is cited as a critical example of how effectively EQUINET engages effectively at the EU level. The absence of an understanding of this nature would undermine EQUINET's efforts to work with EU level partners. Again, the question of positioning emerges as key and the point made that EQUINET is indeed increasingly well positioned to respond and be heard at the EU level.

The Governance and Management Arrangements work well

In research carried out in the UK non-profit sector into organisation that had experienced a significant challenge in the running of their organisations (to the extent that they had attracted the enforced attention of a public sector regulator) the overall finding was: 'the presenting symptoms

vary, although behind them all lie failures of governance³.’ Having governance arrangements in place that are more than representative of an organisation’s membership but that also have board members with the skill to direct the ‘business’ and the systems and process to enable them to do that is essential for organisational success.

Research following the collapse of a number of banks following the 2008 financial crisis, pointed to the prevalence of ‘group think’ amongst boards, norming too quickly around a solution without proper challenge and debate, really drawing on the expertise in the board room. This was styled failures in the ‘independence of mind’ of directors in asking the questions that needed to be asked about risk and exposure, recommending changes to the (in this case) Corporate Governance Code that provided for the requirement for (*inter alia*) rigorous individual appraisals and externally validated governance performance assessments⁴.

Increasingly, organisations are also adopting codes of governance, perhaps prescribed for their sector, as a way of facilitating assessment of their performance and reporting upon the value added of their board.

In the case of EQUINET’s governance, at least in the mind of its members, 71% of respondents viewed governance as good or excellent, of which a third scored ‘excellent’, a high score indeed. Comments in interviews support this general statement, for example: ‘the leadership is collective’ or ‘the board seems to stick to its primary purpose well’.

But there are also observations worthy of further reflection, including comments about the board perhaps being too unchallenging and that it may be slightly dominated by stronger more confident voices. And while there is also a thought about the board’s visibility, most comments paint a good picture.

The view of the performance of the Secretariat is even more positive. 76% found the effectiveness of the management arrangements to be ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ of whom barely under half gave an assessment of ‘excellent’. The comments were equally glowing: ‘astounding output’ for example being one.

The note of caution is not around performance but capacity. The feeling is perhaps that the staff are somewhat overstretched and there is concern that the situation is sustainable, especially should there be turnover and, in a small organisation, where career progression opportunities are limited, this is not an improbably occurrence. Thus, the point to watch, to consider and indeed to prepare for, is staff capacity as workload trend continues to be on an ever upward trend.

The Network is a healthy one

There have been several hints in this assessment of the data so far that point to the idea that EQUINET’s member network is indeed a healthy one, in that it comprises the right organisations in membership, there is active engagement between members especially across the membership as well as up and down, i.e. mediated via the Secretariat. So, to the question at the heart of this section which specifically addresses this point, as to whether the network is a place where this group of organisation want to be and find useful the answer has to be a loud ‘yes’.

³ *With the best of intentions: Learning from Problem Cases III* (Housing Corporation, 2006) now downloadable on the European Urban Knowledge Network <http://www.eukn.org>

⁴ The Walker Report (HM Treasury 2009) http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/walker_review_261109.pdf

The scores for how representative the organisations in members are of the potential catchment 'pool' of members agree that the vast majority of potential members have joined and that there is a little work to recruit the remaining few, especially in Central/Eastern Europe. Equally the scores on network health itself are very high too and interview comments point to the idea that while there are obstacles, for example deriving from diversity and language, the key point is that it is an 'active network and relationships are positive'.

The challenges that the data support are fourfold:

- 1) More thought needs to be given to how member needs are met more sensitively via a segmented approach based on the comment about the four natural member segments
- 2) There is, it is argued also a geographic pattern to engagement which may need additional attention toward particularly the South and East of Europe where, it is suggested, participation is generally at its lowest
- 3) Engaging the members who are not very active at the moment, be that a question of confidence or interest
- 4) Expanding the number of active participants from each member to reach more of the staff of member organisations

The common theme across these comments is depth of engagement. If engagement levels are already generally high, greater depth of engagement amongst members is the key to a stronger network. The means by which this may be achieved will in fact likely be quite varied. For some, it's a question of capacity and confidence building, while for others, it's a matter of developing the offer to be more relevant to their needs, be the most senior or the more junior in their organisations.

Overall

Secrets of success

The question was asked at the beginning of the previous section about the learning from the positive rating by its associated members and, if there are 'secrets of success' what might others learn from EQUINET?

In the view of this evaluation, there are four learning points supported by this data.

Shared clarity of purpose – based upon a strong community identity

The previous section pointed to the view shared by many of a strategic plan that enjoyed simple clarity, but that plan was based not only on a sound and inclusive process, but also upon already solid community foundations. Thus, in this case, the strategic plan performs the role not so much of a shepherd driving sheep - the implicit model of many a strategic plan, justified as providing 'leadership' - but it is more a description of the direction in which a shoal of fish already wishes to go.

Of course, the strategy marshals and directs resources: that is its job; but, as the data in this survey suggests, it also gives voice to a community that already sees itself as a community with a purpose. We do not know how that sense of community came about in this case, but its success is something from which other networks could usefully learn.

In any event, the presence of such simple clarity attest also to the quality of leadership provided by the board, working closely with an effective Executive Director and staff team. At the heart of shared strategic clarity is good governance.

Getting the basics right

Many of the respondents speak of the quiet and professional efficiency of the staff of the Secretariat. They also speak of timeliness, events that are professionally and calmly organised and which meet expectations. Our general assessment of the documentation provided is that it is also professional, efficient and, broadly, clear.

It is often easy to forget basic administrative disciplines when one's overall purpose is a higher one, that of working at the policy level with institutions (members and at the EU level alike) that serve the needs of a population of half a billion people. Again in our experience, a number of EU level networks struggle with such basic questions, but, according to the evidence, this is not the case with EQUINET and this finding is something which it can celebrate, build on and from which others must learn.

Managing expectations

The evidence also points to the ability by staff and board members to manage expectations well, at both the level of members and within EU institutions.

Arriving at a situation where EQUINET's stakeholders understand the organisation's strategic and organisational positioning cannot have been easy and was, by some accounts, something that has taken time to establish, but it seems now to be an established fact. And from that basis of understanding, EQUINET can develop its agenda and exerts its influence in a way that others may not find so easy.

Another aspect of managing expectations – and thereby relationships – well is, with members, communicating a sense of what is on offer, what is possible and what is not possible. When asked open questions in the survey, respondents were quickly able to identify, for example, the core services that EQUINET provides in a way that was remarkably consistent. Thus, not only is what EQUINET is for clear in the minds of members and others, but also what it does and what, more importantly it cannot do. A rare skill to be encouraged!

Mature relationship building

All of these three points suggest a fourth, that of being able to build mature professional relationships between members, their staff, the Secretariat's staff and with supporting institutions, especially within the EC.

Several interviewees attest to the maturity of it all, something quite remarkable in a young organisation. Much of this will again be a factor a leadership but also consistent messaging by staff and board members.

Key Challenges

Quietly maturing

While in our view there were four 'secrets of success', there are four critical challenges ahead as, in the words spoken in one interview suggest, EQUINET seeks quietly to mature as a network.

Answering these challenges will, we suggest, help EQUINET take on the next stage of its development and build on the considerable success to date.

Segmenting the offer

This point is simple to make but hard to do with limited resources. Nevertheless, there is a sense that sometimes smaller events are needed, that are more tailored to the specific needs of a membership whose needs are quite diverse. This is not to suggest that event should be closed to different groups, of course, but the challenge is how to meet diverse needs more sensitively within the range of service offerings EQUINET currently provides.

More focus, more depth, more engagement, higher expectations

There are some conflicting messages in the data but all have the word 'more' in front of them. For some the priority is that more needs to be done across the board, while for others, EQUINET needs more focus, ie to do fewer things better or in larger quantity. For some, there is a need to really focus on engaging the disengaged, while for others it's about finding ways to keep interest amongst the senior staff. There also a question about the scope and depth of policy documents with the word 'more' in there as well.

Thus, one of the strands of future thinking and a second challenge in this evaluation is what of the 'mores' can EQUINET deliver? It is a truism that as organisations gain traction, they attract interest which in turn generates more work. But if income is limited, how intentional is EQUINET's response to be without becoming lost in the reactive, the urgent rather than focussing on what it believes is important?

Overcoming the limits to growth

The assumption in the last challenge was that EQUINET's funding would not grow, at least by much, because it currently chooses to rely on one core funder, - DG Justice's PROGRESS funding - as a mark, initially at least, of its status as an independent body of the public sector, solely funded by one part of the public sector.

Such a strategic approach is defensible and commendable, but it does pose a dilemma and, thus, the third challenge: organisations like to grow; not to grow is in some ways to decline, it is often said. But if you only have one fixed and limited source of funding, how can you grow?

Thus, a challenge for EQUINET in its next planning round is how to meet the growing expectations of its members and other stakeholders, requiring more income, without compromising its initial approach on funding sources nor its status as an independent body, or, at least asking the question: does this approach continue to serve us well now and into the next number of years?

Strengthening the leadership

There are risks and opportunities from the current set of arrangements. The principal risk within the Secretariat is turnover of good people and, in particular, the loss of critical staff. Succession planning may help support eventual transitions when they occur.

The risks for the governing board are a little more diverse in nature. There are, for example, risks that come from a process that elects board members who may (or may not) be willing and have the time to give, who may (or may not) create a great and mature team together and who may (or

may not) possess the range of skills in functional areas or in governance that a good board needs to do its job well.

Modern thinking on governance has noted that it can be isolating within a board and that board may easily not know to what extent it is performing well or not. The danger of complacency or 'group think' is ever present.

The signs are that this board (along with its predecessors) are highly effective. But there are concerns as noted. Putting in place some simple processes that help the board keep in shape will help prevent that potential occurring. What they may be will be up to the board, but could include any of all of the following:

- Skills analysis and seeking to buy advice or co-opt additional board members for specific skills sets or other (missing) attributes
- Adopting a code of governance good practice and reporting on that each year in the annual report
- Ensuring light touch but robust appraisals are in place supported by means to develop the skills of board members if necessary

Other suggestions could be made but all point to the same idea of helping board become more deliberate about their governance skill. Small investments such as these are well documented to support the leadership of an organisation do its leadership job.

Recommendations

In support of an organisation that clearly makes intelligent judgements about what's important for it, we propose not to include a long list of recommendations, but to make only one, a process recommendation.

We recommend that EQUINET's board considers the points made in this report and propose which resonate with it the most and which it may perhaps wish to develop - or see this report develop - in more detail.

Acknowledgements

The board and staff of EQUINET were more than helpful during this short process, providing key documents and arranging interviews, etc with great efficiency and interest. Thanks to them for that.

4. Appendix

Survey Questions

The online survey and the individual interviews followed a similar format. Here are the interview questions:

Direction/purpose

1. How effective are EQUINET's Strategic and Annual Operating Plans to provide the Network and the Secretariat with clarity of direction?

2. How appropriate and effective is your involvement in EQUINET's planning processes?
3. What are the 3-5 key strategic issues facing EQUINET currently?
4. To what extent is EQUINET well positioned to respond to these key strategic issues?
5. How should the strategic direction of the organisation evolve for the next planning period (2015-18)?

Service Delivery

6. What do you understand to be EQUINET's (3-5) key service offerings?
7. The Commission, as funder, likes to define work quality in terms of its timeliness, how accurate it is and how useful the work was. Taking each of the work areas you mentions, what's your view of their timeliness, accuracy and usefulness, ie their quality and impact?
8. Are these service offerings the right ones to deliver the strategy?
9. What improvements can you see for the future in the area of service delivery?
10. Give me a recent example of how EQUINET's service offerings have impacted on your work over the past year.
11. EQUINET's voice: How effectively has EQUINET engaged with key stakeholders at an EU level?
12. How appropriate and timely were the issues brought forward by EQUINET in engaging with stakeholders at an EU level?

Governance & Leadership

13. To what extent do the current governance arrangements of EQUINET provide the network with the leadership and accountability mechanisms it needs?
14. To what extent do the Secretariat's management structures provide the network with the leadership and delivery capacity it needs?
15. In what ways might the leadership and management capacity of EQUINET need to be strengthened?

Network

16. Representativity: to what extent does the network have in membership all the organisations it should have?
17. To what extent is the network a healthy one: i.e. members are well informed, engaged in the issues, actively networking and working effectively in their respective jurisdictions?
18. What are the next steps for the development of network capacity and health?

Documents Reviewed

EQUINET's Performance Reports

- 2011
 - Work Plan
 - Final Report
 - Final Technical Report

- Financial Report
- External Audit
- External Evaluation Report
- Evaluation questionnaire
- 2012
 - Work Plan
 - Budget
 - Documentation on Member fees
 - AGM papers
 - Board meeting papers
 - Training and other events papers
 - Finance and integration plan for Gender Network
 - Publication: Current Challenges for Equality Bodies
- 2013
 - Work Plan

Governance Documents

- EQUINET Statutes
- Strategic Plan 2011-14
- Board meeting papers 21st January 2013
- Financial delegations

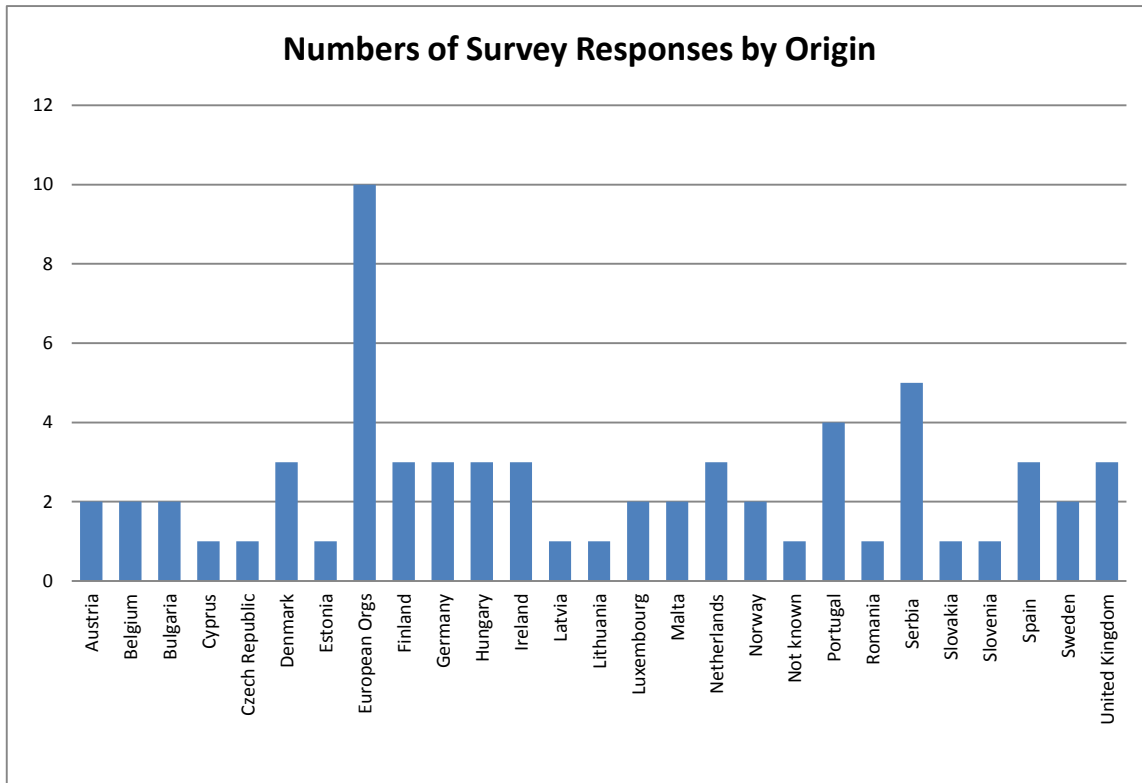
Evaluation & Performance Documents:

- Ad hoc working group performance measurement – key EU networks
- Performance measurement and evaluation framework for EQUINET
- Performance Measures and corresponding sources of information
- Guidance Note on final activity report template
- Final activity report template to be used by beneficiaries of operating grants
- Explanatory Note of ad hoc working group performance measurement – key EU networks

- PROGRESS Strategic Framework
- Developing and Implementing a monitoring Framework for PROGRESS 2007-2013
- Website structure and statistics

Survey respondents

Figure 2: Online Survey Respondents⁵



⁵ NB this data excludes the countries of origin of interviewees which are summarised in the introduction