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Second report of the Advisory Board (AB) and Ethical Board (EB)



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Abstract

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Abstract

This second report of the Advisory Board (AB) and Ethical Board (EB) includes the recommendations provided by the AB about the IS_MIRRI21 project activities and includes the EB member Malcolm Dando's views on the operations of the board.

Advisory Board Report in the IS_MIRRI21 General Assembly

In the framework of the IS_MIRRI21 General Assembly (GA), July 5-7, 2021 in Braga, Portugal, the Advisory Board met in a parallel meeting, held on the 7th of July, to discuss the project activities presented at the Assembly and elaborate a report with recommendations. Those included the extension of the IS_MIRRI21 project, the dissemination and outreach activities, the pricing of microbial cultures and services, the prioritization of activities, and the success of the Transnational access (TNA) pilot as well as the completion of the MIRRI catalogue.

Eero Vuorio and Manfred Ruthsatz attended the meeting in person, while Agnes Borg and Lene Lange participated via teleconference. The MIRRI Executive Director, Luís Soares, also attended the meeting to answer any question concerning the project.

Although the General Assembly was organized in hybrid mode (face-to-face and online), the AB was able to obtain a comprehensive view of the status and progress of the IS_MIRRI21 project. Vuorio and Ruthsatz introduced a summary of the GA MIRRI meeting to the AB members in order to produce some of the recommendations.

Afterwards, Vuorio presented the key observations of the AB to the GA and circulated a draft report among the AB members for review. This final version was approved by all AB members.

Recommendations

1. Delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

The Advisory Board recommends to consider seeking for a cost-free extension of the Project from the European Commission to carry out the agreed work that cannot realistically be done via online meetings. This recommendation does not exclude the AB's recommendation that all project partners should maintain a sense of urgency in all their work regardless of a possible extension, as the end date of the Project is quite near.

2. Dissemination and Outreach activities

In reference to WP7 "*Dissemination and Outreach*" presentation of progress and results, some MIRRI/IS_MIRRI21 partners appeared not to be fully informed of the infrastructure nor of the aim of the IS_MIRRI21 project to complete the implementation of MIRRI Infrastructure. It is not clear to the AB how well these dissemination and outreach activities have reached their target groups in current and prospect MIRRI Member States and in non-MIRRI countries.

For a better comprehension, the AB recommends all Working Groups of the Project to focus on careful clarification of the many non-standard abbreviations used in the Strategic Research Agenda, the Business Plan and other key documents aimed for external use. Such abbreviations can confuse readers, including scientists, policy makers and Member State representatives. As a positive example of a good dissemination document, the AB mentions the TNA flyer, which clearly states that TNA stands for Transnational Access.

The AB would also appreciate to get feedback on the reception of the Strategic Research Agenda by the EC, MIRRI Member States, project partners and the scientific community.

To our knowledge, the SRIA so far has not been formally, extensively sent to EC and governmental representatives. In other cases, no formal procedure for requesting/receiving feedback has been implemented. Nevertheless, The SRIA was sent to the ApM on 23-3-2021. So far, no comments were received. SRIA was also presented during the ESFRI hearings. Overall, following the dissemination through our internal as well as public communication channels, the feedback has been quite positive – as measured, for instance, by the engagement in social media (e.g., likes and shares), or directly from the (informal) comments obtained from MIRRI partner organisations.

3. Pricing of microbial cultures and services

AB Members believe that the discussion on the price list of MIRRI cultures and services during WP3 and WP9 presentations clearly indicated that although a common price list would make MIRRI a cohesive single point of entry infrastructure, it seems very difficult to achieve. The AB agrees with the importance of this aim, but feels it is acceptable to have variable prices for cultures and services, also reflecting the different specializations of the individual culture collections. It is important to be transparent about the final prices of the cultures/services (and its actual content and linked data) for the customers/users. The AB feels that the customers often know where they

want to purchase the microbes/services, with price playing a potentially secondary role. Variability in the prices should make it possible for both small and large and differentially specialized collections to join MIRRI.

4. Prioritization of IS_MIRRI21 activities

The AB highlighted that almost all discussions focused on strains of bacteria and filamentous fungi which suggests that MIRRI focus has already been made. The AB suggested to identify areas to apply for additional funding. Potential future activities that can make MIRRI a global leader in developing state-of-the-art technologies for preserving microbiome samples, as an example, are related to creating a microbiome repository using technologies that introduce the smallest possible changes to the biodiversity of the microbiome sample.

Another future activity to consider would be a small, open-access, bioeconomy-focused repository to pave the way for newcomers into the field of bioeconomy. Such Open Access Bioeconomy collections should include suitable strains, placed in the public domain and easy to work with (no safety concerns and patenting, Convention of Biodiversity or royalty issues), for example, for the biological production (wild-type and recombinantly) and bio-processing (bacterial and fungal) of enzyme producers, suitable for many types of biomass conversion.

Such action would give visibility to how MIRRI activities can assist new partners within and beyond Europe in the use of biological resources in a more efficient manner (by reducing waste and upgrading side streams); which again opens the possibility for increased food security and for contributing to climate change mitigation by resource circularity giving a basis for reduced CO₂ emissions.

The AB also mentioned that industrial participation in MIRRI activities was primarily viewed as a client/user relation rather than a potential membership. This view should be widened, and other forms of industrial participation welcomed. For instance, MIRRI could seek to cooperate with industries to improve the technical installations and state-of-the-art conditions for possibly storing Budapest Treaty patent deposits, safe deposits, and public deposits.

5. Success of the Transnational access (TNA) pilot

The TNA is a very important activity to demonstrate the importance and feasibility of services provided by IS_MIRRI21/MIRRI. The first round of the TNA pilot resulted in four successful applications, but concern was expressed that some of the money for this subproject may not be spent due to lack of further suitable applications. As this could be interpreted as an indicator that the services provided do not meet the requirements of potential customers, it is very important to adjust the TNA offer of future pilot calls to user demands based on a users' survey to assess to interest of potential users.

6. Completion of the MIRRI catalogue

A well-functioning and extensive catalogue to MIRRI culture collections' resources will be the unique entry point for MIRRI. It will be compared with catalogues of other microbial resource centres. Therefore, it is important to make the catalogue extensive, up-to-date, and user-friendly; interoperability and comparability of the data with other repositories is important. Where needed and useful, collaboration with other repositories concerning the catalogue is encouraged.

Ethical Board report in IS_MIRRI21 General Assembly

In the framework of the IS_MIRRI21 General Assembly (July 5-7, 2021, in Braga, Portugal) the Ethical Member board, Malcolm Dando together with the Co-coordinator of the IS_MIRRI21 project, Armando Venâncio, met in a separate meeting held on the 7th of July to discuss the project activities presented at the Assembly and elaborate a report with recommendations about the project. The board member Dando mentioned that there was no quorum with other members of the EB so the ideas shared were only his views on the project.

According to him, EB is a formal body that lacks operationalization. To become more effective, it is necessary to establish dates for periodic meetings and a secretary should be appointed to act as contact point of the EB and to assist in the preparation of these meetings. The EB and PSC need to agree on these proposed points. This will make the EB more functional and of added value for the project. Malcolm Dando referred that in the future, there will be a higher need and demand for considerations on biorisk and biosecurity and these points should be considered for MIRRI.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite the difficult circumstances caused by the pandemic situation, the second reports of the AB and the EB demonstrate their positive contributions to the administrative project management, as well as to the continuation of the development of the project IS_MIRRI21.

The views of EB member Malcolm Dando are key to organize the work of the Ethical Board and its communication and guidance to the IS_MIRRI21 project. Accordingly, the EB would be able to contribute with further effective and timely recommendations.

The AB was pleased to see considerable progress in most areas of IS_MIRRI21, but also repeats its call for a sense of urgency. Furthermore, the AB is concerned that some key individuals are leaving the Project, such as Access and IT officers, and require rapid replacements to maintain the momentum. The AB agrees with IS_MIRRI21 coordinator Nelson Lima's remarks who views IS_MIRRI21 as "a highly unusual" project. It is a challenge to bring such a complex project to a successful end. Nevertheless, the project and its enthusiastic partners have made considerable progress under exceptionally difficult circumstances, thus signalling a bright future for MIRRI.

Finally, following the success of MIRRI in becoming a Landmark on the ESFRI Roadmap in 2021 and other advancements, all recommendations are being carefully considered, and their implications/impacts properly assessed, resulting in appropriate actions being taken in due time.



MIRRI IS21

IMPLEMENTATION AND
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MICROBIAL RESOURCE RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE