European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

Minutes | Scientific Committee

59th meeting

Date	**29 February – 01 March 2024**	**Chair**	**Catherine Comiskey**
Venue	**Cascais Miragem Hotel**		
Present	See the participants list (Annex 1)		

1. Adoption of the agenda

The Chair of the Scientific Committee, Catherine Comiskey, opened the 59th Scientific Committee (SC) meeting informed that it would be recorded and welcomed the newly appointed spokesperson of the Reitox network, Joakim Strandberg, as well as the members of the SC. She proceeded to introduce the agenda (Annex 2) that was adopted unanimously.

2. Feedback from the Chair on relevant meeting and documents (for information)

The Chair provided feedback from the Management Board (MB) meeting in December 2023. She reminded the SC that the minutes of the MB meeting are available online (Annex 3).

The Chair highlighted the main points mentioned in the MB meeting. She emphasised especially the exchange of views on the situation of heroin and the risk of a replacement of this substance with potentially more dangerous synthetic opioids. She also pointed out comments from multiple countries showcasing an increase in nitazene detection and highlighted examples of prevention measures made in Ireland to efficiently communicate the phenomenon among the target population. The Chair also mentioned other points presented during the MB meeting, such as the rules of procedures for the MB and the EU roadmap mentioned to fight organised crime and drug trafficking by the European Commission.

The Chair then opened the floor to comments. While members of the SC were wondering about the possible implementation of a best practice portal focused on prevention in the context of the problematic situation with heroin. The conversation revolved in particular around nitazenes and the importance of providing a better understanding of these substances and how to respond.

2.1. Discussion on shaping future research priorities

The Chair provided feedback from the Annual Dialogue on Research, which took place at the HDG meeting in November 2023 and elaborated on the new mandate of EUDA in this area.

The Chair started by providing the conclusions of the 2022 exercise to the SC, and reminded the SC of remarks made in the previous Annual Dialogue on Research on the lack of funding that did not match the research priorities presented and discussed at the HDG.

Despite efforts to address the funding gap, the Chair observed that the allocated funding still does not adequately match the research priorities and noted the imbalance between health and security funding.

The Chair opened the floor to comments. The SC stressed the stigma faced by researchers in the drug field and recommended that EUDA takes proactive measures to address it. The SC also advocated for separate funding for drug-related research. The Scientific Director stressed the role of the EU member states in defining research priorities. Additionally, the Scientific Director emphasised the necessity of establishing a research database to streamline interactions, foster networking, and support collaborative efforts in research.

3. Formal opinion of the Scientific Committee on the EMCDDA Single Programming Document 2025-27 (for discussion)

The Chair gave the floor to the Scientific Director of the EMCDDA, Paul Griffiths, to inform the SC about the procedure for the redaction of the SC Formal opinion on the EMCDDA Single Programming Document (SPD) 2025-27 (Annex 4).

The Scientific Director pointed out the fact that as it is a multiannual rolling document, the current opinion was inspired by the SC Formal opinion on the last SPD (Annex 5) and adapted. A detailed timeline of the process was shown, and the SC members were invited to comment on this last version by March 15th. The changes will be reviewed and consolidated by the Chair and the Vice-Chair of the SC by the 16th of April and circulated for a last round of consultation. The deadline for the formal adoption is the 24th of June.

The SC approved the procedure and, as a recommendation for the new version, highlighted the importance of stressing the fact that the challenges that will be faced by the EUDA will not be achievable without the support of the National Focal Points (NFPs) and that the Formal opinion needs to integrate a mention on the importance of the adaptation of the Reitox network into the new mandate of the Agency.

4. Welcome by the EMCDDA Director and update on the preparatory activities for the launch of the new EUDA (for information and discussion)

The Director opened his presentation by expressing his consideration to the SC and its commitment and proceeded with an update on the preparatory activities for the launch of the EUDA.

The Director insisted on the multidimensional and multitasking approach needed to pursue the transition of the Agency. The plan conceived to achieve this objective is structured in five key dimensions:

- Customers and value proposition
- Production and resources
- Partnerships and networks
- Customer’s relations and channels
- Cost’s structure and revenue streams

The Director then stressed the importance of partnerships and especially the Reitox alliance in this transition, acknowledging its role in achieving common goals, in decision-making at the European and national levels, as well as a means to engage with practitioners and the population.

The Director reiterated the importance of the ongoing efforts to align the Agency's five areas of work (Drugs use and addictive behaviours, Early warning system and drug alert, Drug supply and markets, Policy analysis and evaluation, and Health and social responses), among which the creation of 12 joint and internal working groups over the past year. Overall, the Director defined the key services that will be provided by the EUDA: anticipate, alert, respond and learn. Specifically, these services will be possible thanks to the opening of new positions, the increase in budget and the launching of more than 200 new procurements this year only.

As the Chair initiated the discussion, the focus centred on exercising caution in assuming new responsibilities without jeopardising the Agency's reputation. Further discussions highlighted the contributions of current staff and the procedures for integrating new recruits to ensure a seamless transition and prevent an integration gap among team members.

4.1. Reflections from the EMCDDA Heads of Scientific Units and RTX NFPs representative – opportunities and challenges from 2024 onwards (for information and discussion)

Paul Griffiths (the Scientific Director), Liesbeth Vandam (Head of Policy Sector, Public Health unit), Roumen Sedefov (the Head of the Security and Safety unit) and Maria Moreira (Head of Reitox and external partners unit) discussed and reflected on the challenges for the future work of the EUDA and challenges and opportunities for the new SC.

The Chair initiated the session and invited presenters to offer insights from their units at the EMCDDA.

Opportunities and challenges from 2024 onwards – Public Health Unit activities

Representing the Head of the Public Health unit, the Head of the Policy sector outlined the opportunities and challenges facing her unit. The global developments that influence HEA priorities, including the imperative for effective and swift responses to global public health challenges, post-Covid-19 health issues, and advancements in new technologies such as AI were mentioned, as well as regulations relevant to these matters.

The three areas of the EUDA mandate 'Monitoring, Preparedness, and Competence Development', provide the overall framework for public health activities. An important focus in 2024 will be reshaping the data collection and working towards an integrated monitoring framework; building on 25 years of monitoring public health indicators & network building expertise. To become increasingly service-oriented, the agency will scale up existing network and strengthen reporting in the area of drug use and harms.

Also, the HoS presented the EUDA threat assessment service, which will provide in depth and rapid assessments of health and security threats. Plans for scaling up costumer centric policy support services were presented, such as the cannabis policy toolkit to support countries with implementing and evaluating cannabis policies.

Additionally, examples of recent developments within the HEA unit in the realm of competence development were provided, such as integrating new modules on cannabis, psychiatric comorbidities, and drug consumption rooms into the European responses guide, as well as expanding the e-learning platform PLATO with new modules. The unit's current activities and the ongoing transition are challenging, but they are being built upon a solid foundation, engaging a creative HEA team.

The SC emphasised the cross-cutting nature of topics and the necessity for inter-unit collaboration.

Preparing (for) the EUDA opportunities and challenges – SAS unit

The Head of the Security and Safety Unit presented to the SC the opportunities and challenges anticipated from 2024 onwards. He provided an overview of the institutional landscape, which encompassed the EUDA regulation and the SPD for 2024, the new business model, and both ongoing and forthcoming commitments within the existing organisational structure of the EMCDDA.

Within the realm of Monitoring, the Head of Unit stressed the importance of making gradual enhancements in the implementation of existing indicators. Underscoring the necessity of ensuring that Member States report on these within the relevant reporting networks (Reitox, EMPACT) to facilitate these improvements.

The Head of Unit also stressed the need to build capacity for the threat assessment system in the market sector, with EDAS, and informed that the main priority for the upcoming year was to invest energy in the crime area, and especially in the topics of violence and homicide, with a major step being the organisation of the first European high-level conference on drug-related violence in 2024. In the topic of drug markets crime and supply reduction, the monitoring would be strengthened by different developments such as satellite technology and open-source intelligence.

Reflections on opportunities and challenges from 2024 onwards – Reitox and external partners unit

The Chair opened the floor for the Head of the Reitox and external partners unit to present reflections on opportunities and challenges from 2024 onwards.

The Head of Unit first reminded the SC that the Reitox Network serves as the cornerstone for EU data collection and analysis, comprising NFPs from 27 EU countries, along with Norway and Turkey. She underscored the importance of the recent decision from the Management Board to reinstate the co-financing of NFPs to €100,000 in 2024, accompanied less flexibility on underreporting. To prepare for

the new Reitox alliance, a Joint Working Group (JWG) has been established, consisting of NFPs and EMCDDA staff. The goal is to present a comprehensive document to the Management Board (MB) by December 2025 to replace the existing Reitox operating framework.

In terms of international cooperation, the Head of Unit expressed those efforts are focused on technical assistance projects and bilateral working arrangements, with a diverse set of countries. There is a commitment to present an outline of a new international cooperation framework to the Management Board by July 2024, followed by a full framework by December 2024.

Technical assistance projects include the continued implementation of the current EU4MD and the IPA projects, the conclusion of the COPOLAD project in Latin America and the Caribbean this year, and the negotiations around a new EUDA4GE project scheduled to start in January 2025.

Institutional coordination involves providing support to the Council, the Commission, and the European External Action Service (EEAS), contributing with briefing notes and presentations insights to various meetings, and providing input to the EU drugs strategy and action plan evaluation and to the implementation of the Commission roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime. Finally, the Head of Unit informed that the Reitox and external partners unit was tasked to set up a framework for engaging with civil society organisations.

On this last aspect, the SC drew attention to the need for harmonising the definition and engagement with civil society across Member States, recognising the diversity of approaches at national level.

NFP and Reitox network – challenges (opportunities?)

One of the newly appointed spokespersons of the Reitox network, Joakim Strandberg, was invited by the Chair to present the opportunities and challenges from 2024 onwards from the Reitox network's perspective.

The spokesperson firstly reminded the SC of the role of the NFPs as the key providers of drug-related information from the Member States and the cornerstone of the analysis made at the EMCDDA to support decision-making at EU and national level. The spokesperson emphasised two major challenges of the new mandate: ensuring the involvement of the NFPs in all different aspects and tasks of the work of the Agency and increasing collaboration between the NFPs and other information sources used by the Agency.

The spokesperson then insisted on the need to protect the role of the NFPs in the collection of data, to ensure that data are comparable between countries and to support the implementation of new data collection tools at a national level. In terms of preparedness, the spokesperson emphasised the need to define concepts and terminology as well as processes and implementation at different levels. He also highlighted the role of NFPs both at national and European level to disseminate information and promote synergies between different actors and stakeholders.

Finally, in the area of competence development, the spokesperson underlined again the need to define concepts and terminology to agree which tasks should be mandatory for NFPs and to define the processes to keep NFPs involved and informed when information is collected through other networks or resources.

The discussion touched on the topic of strengthening local monitoring as a potentially important future area of work of the Agency.

5. Update on the products and outputs 2024 (for information)

The Chair invited the Head of the Communication Unit, Rosemary Martin de Sousa, to present an update on the products and outputs 2024.

Firstly, the Head of Unit emphasised several upcoming dates to underscore the unit's current activities, including the launch of the EU Drug Markets Analysis Insight for Policy and Practice on March 7, and the release of the European Drug Report 2024 scheduled for June 11. The Head of Unit

seized the opportunity to remind the SC members of the dates during which they would have access to the European Drug Report for consultation and feedback, spanning from March 18 to April 1.

Following that, the Head of Unit presented a calendar outlining upcoming publications scheduled to be launched before the introduction of the EUDA. Subsequently, she detailed the unit's ongoing efforts in preparing for the transition, including their involvement in brand implementation, corporate identity, SEO strategy, and the development of a new communication strategy.

Regarding the implementation of the EU brand guide, she elaborated on specific areas of focus such as vocabulary and voice persona, as well as the development of the EUDA messaging house. Finally, the Head of Unit showcased an overview of all the publications launched since the last SC meeting, and provided additional details on human resources, emphasising that no new positions had been allocated to the communication area in the first wave of recruitments and staff were very stretched. However, she mentioned that 1.5 trainees have been added to the team for the upcoming months to help with the numerous communication tasks connected to the launch of the EUDA.

6. Reflection from the EMCDDA Scientific Director and Committee members on the role and the achievements of the Scientific Committee over the years (for information and discussion)

The SC agreed to consider a reflective piece concerning the transition to EUDA. The main emphasis of this piece would be to maintain a focus on science while safeguarding its significance and integrity amidst the transition.

The Chair suggested the Scientific Committee to draft a piece and contemplated publishing it in a scientific journal.

7. Discussion on a handover note to the new Scientific Committee and possibilities and/or a reflection piece (for discussion)

The structure for the piece will consist of three distinct paragraphs:

- The first paragraph would reflect on the historical role of science and its impact on shaping the role of the EMCDDA and drug policies.
- The second paragraph would explore the current context of post-truth and post-COVID debates, considering how new policies are developed within the current highly-dynamic scientific ecosystem and the associated risks, especially as the agency gains more responsibilities.
- The third paragraph would discuss the opportunities and changes that the transition to EUDA presents.

After being consulted, the SC approved the structure of the reflection piece as suggested by the Scientific Director.

8. Writing workshop preparing the reflection piece

Following the reflection, all members were invited by the Chair to jointly work on the reflection piece. The members of the SC split into 3 groups covering the three points. After the breakout sessions, members returned to the plenary, where the rapporteurs from each session shared their respective feedback. The rapporteurs from different sessions were asked to summarise the discussions and send the input to the Chair to work on the first draft of the paper.

9. Update on Lisbon Addictions 2024 (for information)

Klaudia Palczak, principal scientific manager, presented updates on Lisbon Addictions 2024. Firstly, she provided some statistics on the abstract submissions and informed that a record number of 1355 abstracts were submitted in total. 55% were for oral presentations, with a notable increase in workshop submissions, indicating a higher number of interactive sessions. Abstracts were predominantly submitted in the Addiction and mental health track, and a significant number also addressed Behavioural addictions.

Klaudia Palczak acknowledged the significant role of the SC in the conference preparation and execution, including reviewing abstracts, promoting late-breaking submissions, chairing sessions and facilitating the participation of early career researchers.

The questions from the SC revolved firstly around the organisation of pre-congress workshops.

The SC also commented on the potential organisation of a conference on violence and drugs in November.

The Scientific Director, on behalf of the EMCDDA staff, thanked the SC Chair, Vice-Chair and members for their commitment and contribution over the past years, and the Chair closed the meeting.

Annexes:

Annex 1: List of participants

Annex 2: Agenda of the meeting

Annex 3: Minutes of the last MB meeting

Annex 4: EMCDDA Single Programming Document (SPD) 2025-27

Annex 5: Formal opinion of the SC on the SPD 2024-2026