

INAHTA SURVEY on INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

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At the June 2000 meeting of INAHTA, international collaboration was a major topic for discussion. We agreed that there were certainly plenty of good reasons for working together across agencies.

Reasons for international collaboration

- Learn from each others' experience
- Provide mutual support as we develop HTA
- Help each other with technical methodology
- Share information
- Avoid duplication
- Provide international endorsement
- Help with implementation

Not surprisingly therefore there had already been many attempts, including some large scale multi-agency work such as EUR-ASSESS, HTA Europe (1997), Joint INAHTA reports (1996, 1999) and most recently the ECHTA/ ECAHI collaboration funded by the European Commission.

(2001) The success of these initiatives suggested that there is much more to be done in the way of international collaboration. And there had also been many smaller bilateral or multilateral collaborations, of which - judging from the discussions at the INAHTA workshop - some have been more successful than others.

Although international collaboration is intrinsically a Good Thing, one has to recognise the reality of the limitations. We agreed that without large external funding, any new collaborations had to use minimal resources at first, and should preferably start small and grow carefully. We need to walk before we can run; so major international reports and other ambitious initiatives on specific technologies may have to wait. And we needed ways of fulfilling local needs in each individual country while nevertheless thinking globally about the possibilities of wider collaborations to help our day-to-day work. We agreed that unless the individual agencies felt energised by such links, then the potential synergies would simply not happen. And of course the results had to be worth the extra effort.

With this in mind, the INAHTA members agreed that before the next INAHTA meeting they would all make an effort to establish at least bilateral links with one other agency in another country. In June 2001, we would re-convene the discussion to reflect on the experiences, and perhaps plan more ambitious collaborations. These would be based on what we had learnt from the experiences, and should recognise both the advantages that had accrued from such work, and also the barriers that had prevented it from happening more often.

To assist that discussion, I carried out a small e-mail survey of INAHTA agencies in March 2001. It asked member organisations for brief details of any collaborations they had been involved in since June 2000, or any that were planned to happen soon. It also asked what kinds of things had prevented further collaboration.

Results of March 2000 survey on international collaboration

We e-mailed 35 organisations and achieved a 74% response rate - (26/35), of which 21 were from European agencies, 3 from North America, and 2 from Australasia. The respondents from 16 agencies had a title of Director or "head", and 10 were other staff such as senior researcher, information specialist or project co-ordinator. Seventeen of the 26 (65%) responded that their agency had been in contact with another HTA agency with a view to collaborating.

From their answers to the questions asking them which agencies they had worked with, and what kinds of collaborations that they had undertaken, they reported a total of 29 specific projects undertaken with other agencies.

They also reported 26 more general collaborations, such as visits, training, exchange of reports, etc. We did not count involvement in large initiatives such as ECHTA.

Among those who specified the types of collaboration, the results were not easy to interpret as agencies often cited others who had not in turn cited them in their own responses! We

have avoided double counting if they have cited each other - which only happened in 8 cases. Bearing these caveats in mind, the most common type of collaboration mentioned was project work (13), with visits (7) and training/ mentoring (6) and exchanges/ ongoing discussion of reviews (4) being the next most common. Exchange of staff, study tours, networks and information exchange, methodological developments and sharing priority lists for HTA were also mentioned.

What did our respondents say prevented further collaboration? Top of the list was staff and resources (8), and the next culprit was "time" (4).

Others included language (2), a lack of clear leadership (2), and problems over confidentiality (2). Incompatibility of the processes in the different agencies, their interests, or the local contexts were each mentioned by only one respondent.

Conclusions

Despite the limitations of the survey, there has clearly been a good deal of collaboration, both general and specific. There have also been the predictable barriers to undertaking more such international work. At the INAHTA meeting in June 2001, we will be in a good position to review the lessons learnt from this activity, and plan perhaps more ambitious attempts to continue to climb the slippery ladder from small collaborations to major international reports and initiatives.
