German
Biobank Node
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Recommendations of the External Scientific and Ethical Advisory Board (SEAB) for the German Biobank Node and German Biobank Alliance

SEAB meeting on 13 September 2019 in Munich

The SEAB is highly impressed by the fantastic amount of work that has been done. The GBN and GBA are clearly focused and working very energetically in the areas of key importance. At this point of the project, the SEAB will not make detailed comments about each of the work packages – this is not because there is nothing to comment on, but because the overall progress is excellent and the focus now is the continuation of the work. Congratulations!

What is happening in Germany is leading in Europe. No other country is investing so much energy and resources in developing the biobanking sector. Magnificent effort has been put in and an infra-structure has been created. BBMRI-ERIC is very lucky to have GBN and GBA: the consortium is a key source of ideas and results for them to incorporate within the European context.

The SEAB has the following comments:

Increase user numbers

The number of biobank users in Germany must be grown to correspond to this great work, to the potential of what has been constructed. Increasing the number of biobank users would also lead to more research "success stories" demonstrating the value of both the biobanks and the biobank alliance and attract even more users. There are two ways to achieve this goal:

(1) Communication: contacts between the individual biobanks and local research infrastructures must be strengthened. Available information on websites is essential but face-to-face time with (potential) biobank users is also necessary.

(2) By requirement: A centralised solution would be very effective, nationally requiring that only certified biobanks be used for research. The central argument for such a requirement is the high quality levels to which these biobanks operate. They are a prerequisite for reproducible research results. High sample quality is also demanded by researchers: GBN/GBA have conducted an online survey among "potential users" – mainly researchers who had not collaborated with a biobank so far. When asked what would convince them the most to use a biobank in the future, high sample quality was their most frequent answer. For this reason, GBN/GBA should encourage funding bodies to include a corresponding requirement in their funding guidelines.

Strengthen the alliance

In relation to what has been accomplished by GBN/GBA and what lies ahead, the SEAB sees two main points:

(1) The Medical Informatics Initiative is a challenge. The common work on the consent module is a good starter but it is still a long way from the actual goal which is the exchange of clinical data to link to samples. This should be worked on with a clear strategy in mind. It will require meetings, persuasion, discussion and will not be easy, but is highly important.

(2) The National Cohort also seems to be of great significance to the SEAB. If the National Cohort were to be a member of the Alliance, it would considerably strengthen GBN/GBA. In the SEAB's view, this collaboration is very important, leading to an exchange of information and experience between these two great projects.

Future perspective

A centralised infrastructure has very distinct advantages, because certain activities inherently must be done centrally. For example, there is no point in every single biobank having its own legal representative interpreting the laws in their own local way. The same applies to quality management: by definition, ring trials can only be done centrally. Not only have the GBA ring trials been successfully implemented, but the efficiency and quality improvements that are a direct result of these ring trials have been documented and demonstrated.

The SEAB sees GBN/GBA as a highly successful, necessary initiative whose objectives must be pursued beyond the current funding phase – which means long-term. The Board therefore hopes that the funding body and the consortium members will find a way to further facilitate this groundbreaking commitment to biobanking in Germany.

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has decided on Germany remaining a BBMRI-ERIC member for a further time period. Maintaining the existing contact node in the country (the GBN) is a logical consequence of this decision. The question, of course, is how this node and the associated network of biobanks will be funded in the future.

BMBF initiatives such as the "National Decade Against Cancer" highlight the value of the GBN/GBA infrastructure because it creates an important foundation for successful (reproducible) research.

Also, the Medical Informatics Initiative could and should profit from the GBN/GBA achievements. A stronger collaboration here would lead to increased efficiency – the GBN/GBA infrastructure itself stands for efficiency in research. Rationalisation between MII and GBN/GBA of access to, quality control of, and storage of clinical data is the goal here.

Examples of how GBN/GBA have eliminated duplication and reduced costs across the alliance of biobanks are their centralised work on quality management, improved accessibility and visibility of samples and data through IT and harmonised consent forms, as well as the efforts towards a comprehensive pricing catalogue. GBN's and GBA's commitment to providing optimal conditions for efficient and reproducible biomedical research, avoiding unnecessary parallel developments, ultimately saves (tax) money.

GBN/GBA not only help to reduce costs, but also help create excellent conditions for attracting investments. By implementing a "one-stop-shop model" and simplifying the process to negotiate access to samples, GBN/GBA will increase the number of cooperation between GBA biobanks and the pharmaceutical and diagnostics industry.

In the SEAB's view, these are key arguments why a continuation and further development of GBN/GBA are necessary, which should be put forward by consortium members in discussion with the funding body.

The project has enormous potential. A promising foundation has been laid to further build on. The SEAB congratulates GBN and GBA on their achievements and wishes the consortium a successful future!

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(Absent: Johann Eder, Kurt Zatloukal)

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