

IARU Secretariat Survey 2021: Summary Report

Introduction

In May 2021 the incoming Cambridge Secretariat launched an online survey open to everyone currently involved in IARU. The survey aimed to engage the IARU membership on specific questions and to capture the ideas and current concerns of members. It was structured as a mixture of required and optional questions, and respondents were able to provide free text responses to almost every question.

This report summarises the responses and highlights the key messages that emerged. Direct quotations from selected respondents are also provided for illustrative purposes. The list of survey questions can be found in the appendix at the end of the report (p.6).

Participation

- There were around 120 potential respondents. 54 people responded to the survey.
- Respondents were not required to give their names, but many respondents self-identified as members of a particular group, as current Senior Officers, or key contacts. This made it possible to infer that at least one member from every current group or initiative responded to the survey.
- More experienced members of IARU were more inclined to respond: 42% had been involved in IARU for at least 5 years, 81% for at least 2 years.

The survey results tend to reflect the perspective of the majority of respondents, that is, more experienced, ordinary group and initiative members.

Responses

How active is your group/initiative?

- The overwhelming majority (84%) of those who belonged to a group described it as being ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ active before the pandemic.
- The consequences of not being able to meet in person over the past year have varied between groups: it has meant minor disruption to groups that were accustomed to meeting online before 2020, but more significant disruption to groups that built annual activity around an in-person meeting.

What makes a group productive?

There was a handful of recurring answers to this question. Those mentioned most often were:

| Response | Number of Mentions |
|---|--------------------|
| Clear planning about the work programme and goals | 16 |
| Committed leadership in the group/initiative | 14 |
| Engaged members | 13 |
| Face-to-face meetings | 13 |
| Clear communication from the Senior Officers | 6 |

Other recurring answers were (in descending order of frequency): having members' IARU work recognised and supported by their institutions; being able to access funding to attend meetings and to seed projects; frequent communication; having the right individuals from a university on the group. One respondent also singled out the importance of groups having a realistic sense of the administrative and resource requirement of work.

The importance attached to in-person meetings was notable. Several respondents said that they felt the loss of these meetings, and that in-person events were important for allowing members to get to know one another, for providing additional focus and motivation, and for overcoming the barrier of different time zones. Groups will have to balance the value of meeting in-person with the efficiency and reduced environmental impact of meeting online.

'Clear leadership and engagement of the members in projects/programs is important. There should be consensus among all members regarding projects and programs to ensure commitment and engagement.'

'Support from, and the commitment being valued by, the home institution. Enthusiastic and active group leads. Demonstrable benefit to both the institution and the individual involved. Support and direction from the IARU Senior Leaders.'

'The relatively small size of the group - generally about 20 - helped to foster a collegiality and closeness of the group. The annual face-to-face meeting and the activities associated with the annual gathering helped to deepen these collaborations. This led to generous sharing of experience and projects undertaken at each of the respective universities that continued through on-line discussions of sub-committee activities.'

Would it be helpful to have written guidance?

| Type of Guidance | Yes | No | Unsure |
|--|-----|----|--------|
| Guidance for Creating New Groups | 40 | 3 | 10 |
| Guidance for Rethinking / Retiring Groups | 38 | 6 | 9 |
| Guidance for Identifying and Prioritising Work | 32 | 10 | 11 |

A clear majority of respondents were in favour of all suggested types of group guidance. The main point of concern was about providing guidance for how groups can identify and prioritise work. Respondents were also concerned that the guidance in general might be too prescriptive, too rigid for everyone to follow, lead to more paperwork, or not be relevant for everyone.

‘I have previously attempted to help my campus develop IARU initiatives. The communication was challenging and although I was looked to as the point person for such activities, I did not have somewhere to go for guidance, nor do I completely understand where or how IARU activities are tracked.’

‘It should be intended to be purely a guidance and not to increase the amount of administrative tasks for the groups.’

‘Guidance per the suggested areas above will assist with alignment at institutional level and enhance consistency in bench marking whilst still allowing for flexibility regarding the identification and prioritisation of detailed work.’

‘Written guidance could provide a checklist that could help potential applicants make sure their proposals are aligned with IARU’s funding structure and both short-term and long-term mission objectives. Three areas currently exist that are designed for students, research, and university administrators but it is not clear to me what are the broad objectives of IARU and what it’s hoping to achieve. Our working groups and initiatives need to be connected to those broader, IARU objectives.’

What makes IARU different?

Respondents were clear about what sets IARU apart. Three responses appeared far more frequently than any others:

| Response | Mentions |
|----------------------------------|----------|
| Diverse, truly global membership | 23 |
| Small number of members | 19 |
| Shared perspectives and issues | 13 |

In their comments, respondents added that IARU was a valuable way of getting global (as opposed to regional) perspectives on problems from like-minded institutions, since this provided a blend of diversity and common ground. The small number of members was repeatedly emphasised: members believe that it sets IARU apart because it allows people to get to know and trust each other, and so to work more openly and quickly. Related to this, multiple respondents mentioned the particular value of the Presidents’ Meeting. It was pointed out how exceptional it is in global HE to have such a small group of leaders from truly world-leading institutions coming together for face-to-face discussions over multiple days.

‘It’s a small group of elite, diverse institutions. There are other settings where we interact and brainstorm and problem solve with professional peers, but they tend to be both larger and, geographically (and thus culturally), less diverse.’

‘The global nature of the network and the fact that most institutions are not competing against each other encourages the sharing of useful information and examples of best practice. I have benefitted personally from being able to contact my counterparts at IARU institutions to ask how they have addressed particular sector challenges’

What opportunities do we have?

The three most frequently mentioned opportunities were:

| Opportunity | Mentions |
|--|----------|
| Best practice sharing | 13 |
| Provide more support and encouragement for research collaborations | 8 |
| Staff and student exchange | 4 |

The continuation and strengthening of best practice sharing was the most frequently mentioned opportunity, which in part reflects the significant amount of work that is already being undertaken in this area.

Beyond these top three opportunities, there were a number of other responses about current opportunities. Some respondents encouraged the resumption or intensification of established activities, such as:

- Professional networking
- Bench marking
- Intensified exchange on the Presidential and Senior Officer levels. One respondent placed particular stress on the need to maximise opportunities for constructive, off the record discussion in meetings.

Others suggested new ideas:

- Using digital tools to enable shared classrooms and staff best practice sharing
- Sharing of Covid-related lessons
- Encouraging connections between Senior Officers and IARU members in individual universities
- Providing more funding to group initiatives
- Allowing university partners to attend IARU meetings to stimulate new ideas

'Opportunities continue to be best practice sharing and joint projects, staff exchanges and benchmarking.'

'The only ongoing IARU research project is the Ageing, Longevity and Health Initiative. Several other research initiatives started but rapidly lost momentum and have since been shelved. There would seem to be scope (and benefit) from the institutions working together on research addressing global challenges.'

'It would be ideal for meetings to have less diplomatic fanfare and more time for real 1:1 communication and 'off the record' type communication...How can we foster this in a remote setting and create more opportunities for real time conversation and collaboration...?'

What challenges do we face?

Two, closely related challenges were noted more frequently than any others:

| Challenge | Mentions |
|--|----------|
| Securing funding within universities to support an individual's participation in group work (esp. travel costs). | 6 |
| Getting institutions and managers to incentivise members to be active in IARU | 3 |

There was a sense that greater institutional backing (financial support as well as encouragement and recognition), would make it easier for individuals to participate more fully, and incentivise others to join for the first time.

The other challenges identified were a mix of long-standing and pandemic-related issues:

- Current difficulty in meeting in-person and working virtually across time zones
- Ensuring members make and have time to participate
- Loss of resources from universities due to pandemic impact (which is likely to have exacerbated the problem of institutional support for IARU participation)
- Finding common ground between different institutions
- Having a IARU-wide vision so that the time spent ultimately pays off
- Reviewing whether some groups need to be overhauled or retired

'The most engaged members are the ones from institutions that underscore the importance of IARU and their commitment to IARU, or are individuals who are truly invested in the vision of the Alliance and are actively engaged despite the lack of enthusiasm, support or clear commitment on the part of their home institutions. The latter case is most unsustainable as it makes faculty recruitment near impossible. For the alliance and its initiatives to be vibrant and robust, all institutions must provide incentives or clear mandates to their representatives.'

'Academia and students of the member universities may lack knowledge about the purpose and activities of IARU at a local level.'

What could the Secretariat start or stop doing?

30 people offered suggestions. By far the strongest message was that better communication within IARU would be very welcome. 30% of those who responded to the question said that they had little understanding of what other groups were doing. Multiple respondents also wanted:

- The Secretariat's activities to be more visible to those who are not group leaders
- The website to contain more information and up to date content. One respondent suggested having website contact lists that are downloadable and editable by IARU members.
- To have a clearer sense of IARU's strategic priorities and direction to help inform their work, especially in a post-pandemic context.

New proposals to facilitate better communication included a quarterly IARU newsletter and some all-IARU events, for example, a seminar organised by one university on topics of shared interest.

Appendix: Survey Questions

1. For how long have you been involved with IARU [Less than 2 years / 2 – 5 years / 5 years or more]
2. Please describe your involvement in IARU over this time (you can specify groups/initiatives if you wish).
3. If applicable, how active is your group/initiative (e.g. not very, fairly, very), and was the level of activity significantly different before Covid-19?
4. In your opinion, what are some of the factors that assist in the productivity of groups and initiatives?
5. Do you feel it would be helpful to have written guidance suggesting things to consider when setting up a new group or initiative? [Yes / No / Unsure]
6. Do you feel it would be useful to have written guidance to help groups and initiatives evaluate their performance and decide if their purpose should be redefined - or if the group/initiative has served its purpose? [Yes / No / Unsure]
7. Do you think it would be useful to have general written guidance to help groups and initiatives identify and prioritise work? [Yes / No / Unsure]
8. Do you have any further thoughts or comments about making written guidance available?
9. In your experience, what is the distinctive value of IARU compared to other professional organisations in which you are involved, within your particular area?
10. What do you think are the key areas of opportunity and challenge for IARU in providing value to its members?
11. Do you have any suggestions for things the Secretariat could do more or less of, or start doing?