



Deliverable 1.3 (M18)

Title

Initial evaluation of the access given

Version 1

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1. Objective

The deliverable describes a first summary assessment of the AQUAEXCEL 3.0 (AE3) access given and of the procedures related to the access system from the point of view of the various participants, so that corrections may be taken to make it more practical, efficient, and user-friendly.

The main difference between the AE3 access system and AQUAEXCEL²⁰²⁰ access system is the use of the new ARIA platform (see deliverable 1.2). As such one of the important aspects to assess is how the ARIA system has facilitated or otherwise the implementation of the AE3 transnational access.

This is the first report related to planned surveys to be carried out at periodic intervals (M18, M36 and M56) to TNA users, hosts, reviewers, and Selection Panel Members to obtain feedback on their experience of TNA and recommendations for improvement.

2. Background

One of the main objectives of AE3 is to provide access to the aquaculture facilities of its partner institutes. AE3 offers a permanently opened call with intermittent evaluations. The ARIA platform is used to handle the applications – submission, evaluation by a mix of internal and external reviewers, and viability assessment by facility (TNA) managers. After the completion of TNA, users and hosts provide feedback.

The ARIA system received the first application on 29th September 2021 and each application is expected to take up to 3 months until decision. The present deliverable was planned to be a first assessment to identify possible bottlenecks or improvements related to the TNA. However, by the time the deliverable was to be submitted (April 2022) few TNAs had been completed and therefore no feedback from users was available. Therefore, it was decided to prepare specific questionnaires to users, reviewers, and TNA managers to obtain information to address the objectives.

3. Methodology

Questionnaires with questions specifically addressed to the targets – users, reviewers, TNA managers – were prepared on Microsoft forms (see annex) and a hyperlink to the questionnaire sent by e-mail to users (19), reviewers (32) and TNA managers (17) that had already been involved in any application in AE3.

4. Results

The respondents to the questionnaire were 11 users, 17 TNA managers and 11 reviewers.

4.1. User feedback

4.1.1. Communication

Most users (82%) found out about the AE3 TNA call through colleagues, one from e-mail and one directly from the AE3 webpage.

4.1.2. Clarity of information about TNA facilities available

All users (100%) found the information about available facilities clear.

4.1.3. Clarity about services available

Only one user (9%) found the information about services unclear. That user indicated difficulties in understanding what was expected to be submitted in the form (which could be a different issue).

4.1.4. Use of orientation committee

Only one user (9%) needed directions on how to develop the project provided by the Orientation Committee.

4.1.5. Decision about which facility to use

Factors weighing on decision making varied from being appropriate for the species, project or planned collaborations, based on website information and feedback from TNA managers, familiarity, advice by colleagues, expertise available and quality of facilities and instruments.

4.1.6. About ARIA

Most users (91%) were not previously familiar with ARIA. Users considered ARIA neither friendly nor unfriendly – mode score 3, average 3.3 (score 1 is not friendly and 5 is excellent). The practical information provided to help the application process could be considered good (average 3.8, mode 4) and most users (82%) considered they did not need further help using ARIA. Nevertheless 50% indicated that a short video could be of help.

4.1.7. Feedback statement from reviewers

Although two users had not yet received feedback from the reviewers about their application, 40% considered the feedback they had received to be useful or very useful.

4.1.8. Usefulness of information provided by TNA host

Among the 8 applicants for whom the question was relevant, 85% considered the information provided by the TNA host to be very good or excellent (average score 4.3 out of 5).

4.1.9. Satisfaction with TNA application and selection

The overall satisfaction with the application procedure is high (average score 4.3 out of 5). The proposals for improvement were simplification of procedures and improving ARIA (templates, printing as PDF, direct contact with platform administration to clarify issues, better adjustment to different screen sizes, possibility of editing).

4.2. TNA managers feedback

4.2.1. Communication

Most TNA managers were satisfied with the visibility of their facility (average 4.1 and mode 4 out of 5). A variety of proposals for dissemination were made but mostly they did not differ from what is already done (social media, e-mail, etc). New suggestions were to contact scientific societies (EAS), other organizations (ICES, Eurocean) and to target conferences.

4.2.1. *About ARIA*

Ten of the 17 responders (59%) stated they were familiar with ARIA. Three (18%) considered ARIA is not user friendly and 6 (36%) considered it quite user friendly (average score 3.2 out of 5), while 6 (36%) also considered they needed help to navigate ARIA. Three (18%) considered there was no need of a video to help with ARIA while the remaining either thought it was needed or were not sure.

4.2.2. *Suggestions to improve the selection procedure*

Suggestions included: improving ARIA (failed to save report), speeding up the reviewing and decision-making process, TNA managers to be notified of project application outcomes by e-mail, possibility TNA managers being contacted before an application, differentiate in the application process between long term and short-term projects (with and without additional external funding).

4.2.3. *Main challenges when hosting TNA*

The main challenges reported are the lengthy period required for approval including ethical aspects and animal experimentation licenses, high administrative burden, unclear reporting procedures, reimbursing users, and work scheduling.

4.2.4. *Satisfaction with impact of TNA on facility*

Most TNA managers were at least moderately satisfied with the impact of TNA on their facility (average score 3.6 out of 5, mode 3), with 48% very satisfied (4 to 5 score) and 12% unsatisfied (1 to 2 score). Most TNA managers (65%) considered TNAs have increased or possibly stimulated R&D and increased scientific networking of the facility. Indeed, all TNA managers considered there were new opportunities created by TNA which included networking and cooperation, seeds for new projects, knowledge exchange, new knowledge and novel ideas from non-core areas of the facilities, opportunities for future collaborations and visibility.

4.3. *Reviewers feedback*

4.3.1. *About ARIA*

Only 4 of the 11 active reviewer responders (36%) were familiar with ARIA. Four (36%) considered ARIA is not user friendly and also 4 (36%) considered it quite user friendly (average score 2.8 out of 5), and 4 (36%) also considered they needed help to navigate ARIA. Five (45%) considered that a video definitively would be helpful, in particular for first time users.

4.3.2. *Adequacy of evaluation information*

Reviewers considered very good the provided evaluation guidance (response average score 4.1 out of 5), the scoring system (3.9 out of 5), and the administrative process for the reviews (response average score 4 out of 5), and the overall reviewing experience (response average score 3.8 out of 5). While some reviewers considered the reviewing process fine and had no suggestions, others made suggestions for improvement which included improvement of the layout of ARIA, or even reviewers not needing to use ARIA (i.e. generation of PDF files for offline evaluation), a simplification of the process to make it less time consuming, and reviewers would like to receive feedback of the final decision on applications. One reviewer suggested guidance d for the question "Compliance with EC Agenda and broadening access".

5. Conclusion

Overall, there seems to be an effective communication system that reaches users in different ways and reflects to a large extent the existing offer provided by the different facilities. Although the effectiveness of communication is not the main objective here, the possibility of exploring alternative channels and professional networks could be considered.

Users consider information about facilities and services available clear and sufficient to decide which facilities to use. For this, factors such as reputation, existing expertise or specialist facilities weigh in the decision-making. In contrast, TNA managers feel they should be involved in the application process from the very early stages, before the application is submitted, so that the applications contain more specific information about the actual facilities and services that will be used.

The ARIA system seems to be a stumbling block for some users, TNA managers and reviewers, mainly because of bad experience (both technical issues and design). Most have a neutral attitude, considering it to be neither particularly appealing nor too difficult. ARIA has been developed by INSTRUCT-ERIC and is used also by other ESFRI infrastructures. For AE3, it represented moving from a fairly labour-intensive process of e-mailing and file handling to a more automated system. Faster feedback to resolve technical issues is necessary for improvement, and a short video could in some cases help first time users to navigate ARIA.

In general, users seem quite satisfied with the process of application and selection, including the information provided by the TNA host. Around 40% did not find the feedback from the reviewers useful, which suggests some room for improvement.

TNA managers consider too lengthy the period between application, selection and TNA visits. There were also suggestions for simplification of the evaluation process to make it less time consuming by reviewers. A review of each step in the procedures should be carried out with the objective of shortening it as much as possible without affecting its integrity and rigour.

Similarly, to what extent it is possible to simplify what has been considered by TNA managers as “administrative burden” needs evaluation. For example, the award of licenses for animal experimentation varies between countries and simplifying the process may not be possible. However, the suggestion that TNA managers be informed by e-mail of the outcome of applications at the same time as applicants can accelerate communication between the two and the start of the necessary procedures.

Only a minority of TNA managers were not satisfied with the impact of TNA on their facility, while all of them expressed possible positive outcomes, in particular crossbreeding of knowledge and opportunities for new collaborations.

In summary, although at this stage few users went through a full TNA, it is possible to determine an overall degree of satisfaction with the TNA process by the different players involved. However, specific aspects need to be addressed for a more efficient delivery and benefit of those involved. These issues and suggestions outlined in this deliverable will be subject of analysis, and improvements incorporated wherever possible and necessary.

6. Appendix

6.1. User feedback

AQUAEXCEL 3.0: feedback on TNA experience and recommendations for improvement.
This is to obtain feedback and ideas for improvement after the initial calls for transnational access

1. How did you find out about AQUAEXCEL 3.0 transnational access (TNA) calls?
2. If previous answer was "Other" where?
3. Was it easy to decide which TNA facility to choose to develop your project?
Yes/No
4. If No, why Not?
5. Did you use the Orientation Committee?
Yes/No
6. How did you decide which TNA facility to use?
7. Did you find the information about the services offered clear?
8. If Not, please explain
9. ARIA is the online application system used in AQUAEXCEL 3.0. Were you familiar with the use of ARIA?
Yes/No
10. How user-friendly is ARIA? (1 not friendly-5 excellent)
11. How do you rate the practical information provided on how to apply for access? (1 not useful-5 excellent)
 - Pre-application process: contacting TNA managers with proposal plans
 - Registering and applying through ARIA
12. Do you need help/further help in the use of ARIA?
Yes/No
13. if Yes, would a short help video be useful?
14. How useful was the review feedback? (1 poor-5 excellent 6 - Not applicable yet)
15. Once your project was accepted, how adequate was the information provided by the host TNA on how to use the facility? (1 poor-5 excellent 6 - Not applicable yet)
16. How do you rate your satisfaction with the general TNA application and selection process? (1 not satisfied -5 very satisfied)
17. Please provide up to 3 proposals for improvement, if considered relevant
13. Name
14. E-mail

6.2. TNA manager feedback

AQUAEXCEL 3.0: feedback on TNA experience and recommendations for improvement.
This is to obtain feedback and ideas for improvement from TNA managers after the initial calls for transnational access

1. Are you satisfied with the visibility of your TNA facilities and services through AQUAEXCEL 3? (1 not satisfied-5 excellent)
2. How could TNA be better promoted?
3. Which additional networks could be used to promote dissemination (e.g., EurOcean, JPI Oceans, ICES, others...)?
4. ARIA is the online application system used in AQUAEXCEL 3.0. Were you familiar with the use of ARIA?
Yes/No
5. How user-friendly is ARIA? (1 not friendly-5 excellent)

6. Do you need help/further help in the use of ARIA?

Yes/No

7. If Yes, would a short help video be useful?

8. +Please suggest up to 3 improvements to the evaluation and selection procedure.

9. What are the main difficulties/challenges when hosting TNA?

10. Are you satisfied with the impact the TNA has on your facility? (1 not satisfied -5 very satisfied)

11. Have the TNA outputs stimulated new R&I / increased networking at your facility?

Yes/No/Maybe

12. As a TNA provider what is the most important opportunity created by TNA at your facility/institute.

13. Name

14. E-mail

6.3. Reviewer feedback

AQUAEXCEL 3.0: feedback on TNA experience and recommendations for improvement.

This is to obtain feedback and ideas for improvement from reviewers after the initial call for transnational access

1. ARIA is the online application system used in AQUAEXCEL 3.0. Were you familiar with the use of ARIA?

Yes/No

2. How user-friendly is ARIA? (1 not friendly-5 excellent)

3. Do you need help/further help in the use of ARIA?

Yes/No

4. If Yes, would a short help video be useful?

5. How do you rate the adequacy of information on which the evaluation is based? (1 not satisfied -5 very satisfied)

6. How do you rate the guidance and scoring system provided? (1 poor-5 excellent)

7. How do you rate the administration of reviews? (1 poor-5 excellent)

8. How appropriate do you find the overall reviewing process? (1 poor-5 excellent)

9. Please suggest up to 3 improvements to the reviewing procedure.

10. Name

11. E-mail

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