Deliverable 1.4 (M36)

Title

Interim evaluation of the access given

Version 1

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Contents

1. Objective

The deliverable describes an interim assessment of the AQUAEXCEL 3.0 (AE3) access provided including the feedback from partners, so that specific actions can be taken where appropriate to improve the value and effectiveness of TNA projects. The report contemplates the opinions of TNA users, hosts, reviewers, and Selection Panel Members.

This is the second report related to the access system. The first report focused on the ARIA access platform for applications when few TNA visits had been completed. The following report will take place close to the end of the project.

2. Background

One of the main objectives of AE3 is to provide access to the aquaculture facilities of their partner institutes. AE3 offers a permanently open call with intermittent evaluations. The ARIA platform handles the applications' submission, evaluation, and communication. A mix of internal and external reviewers carries out evaluations. The assessment of viability is carried out by facility (TNA) managers. After the completion of TNA, users and hosts provide feedback. Each application is expected to take up to 3 months until decision.

The ARIA system received the first application on 29 September 2021; the last evaluation is expected to occur six months before project completion.

A first interim evaluation was done at month 18 (D1.3). The present deliverable was planned to identify bottlenecks and necessary improvements related to the TNA procedure after a considerable number of projects have been completed. The analysis is based on user feedback aided by questionnaires sent to users, reviewers, and TNA managers.

3. Methodology

Questionnaires with questions addressed explicitly to the targets – users, reviewers, and TNA managers - were prepared on Microsoft Forms (see annexe). A hyperlink to the questionnaire was sent by e-mail to users (51 approved projects, eight not approved and nine pending approval), reviewers (65) and TNA managers (15).

When respondents indicate suggestions that have already been implemented, a note is provided in the text.

4. Results

The respondents to the questionnaire were 35 users (25 approved projects), 11 TNA managers, and 29 reviewers, of which 1/3 were external to AE3.

4.1. User feedback

4.1.1. Communication

Most users found out about the AE3 TNA call through colleagues (82.4%), other from the AE3 website (5.9%), newsletter (2.9%) other supervisors (2.9%), European Aquaculture Society dissemination (2.9%), TNA manager (2.9%), a previous applicant (2.9%).

4.1.2. Clarity of information about TNA facilities available

All but one user (97%) found the information about available facilities clear.

4.1.3. Rating the information provided and how to apply during the pre-application process

Most respondents (79%) considered very good or excellent the information made available before the application, which in most cases also entailed contacting the TNA manager (4.4 out of 5, where 5 is the maximum). Four (12%) considered the information satisfactory (score 3).

4.1.4. The role of the TNA managers

Only four respondents did not contact the TNA managers (12%). Of those who reached the TNA manager, with one exception, considered the interaction very important to prepare the application (4.7 out of 5, where 5 is the maximum).

4.1.5. Use of Orientation Committee

Three users (8.3%) contacted the Orientation Committee for support in preparing their application.

4.1.6. Decision about which facility to use

At the top, as the first point in deciding which facility to use, was the quality of facilities (69%) and collaboration with local researchers (21%), followed by quality of instrumentation, technical support, clarity of services offered, and feedback during the preparation of the application. The size of facilities and distance from home were considered relevant by less than 10% of respondents.

4.1.7. Description of services of chosen facility

All respondents found the description of services by the facility of their choice clearly described.

4.1.8. About ARIA, the application platform

Only eight respondents (23%) were familiar with ARIA. Overall, the users considered the practical information provided on registering and applying through ARIA satisfactory to good (3.6 out of 5, where 5 is the maximum). It included two respondents (6%) who considered the information provided unsatisfactory (score 2).

Overall, the users considered the ARIA system satisfactory (score 3.3 of 5, where 5 is the maximum). Five respondents (14%) thought the ARIA system was unsatisfactory or poor, and 12 (35%) indicated needing further help using ARIA.

4.1.9. Feedback statement from reviewers

With one exception, the applicants considered the reviewer feedback helpful or very useful (4.3 out of 5, where 5 is the maximum).

4.1.10. Overall reviewing process

With one exception, the applicants were satisfied with the overall reviewing process (4.4 out of 5, where 5 is the maximum).

4.1.11. The usefulness of information provided by the TNA host after the project was accepted

Of the 29 users that had gone through TNA, 20 considered information provided by the TNA host to be very good or excellent and the remaining satisfactory (overall average score 4.4 out of 5).

4.1.12. Satisfaction with TNA application and selection

The overall satisfaction with the application procedure was high (average score 4.5 out of 5), with only one user not achieving the objectives (for reasons not attributable to the host). Fifty per cent of users did not make suggestions for improvement. The proposals for improvement were: to move away from ARIA, the review process too long, the possibility to modify and resubmit projects, and more space for project description (note: there is no space limit in the form, and now there is the possibility of adding supporting information), more clarification on what is required before, during, and after the stay (documents that need to be filled, objectives, what reports, when, how to fill them), simplification of paperwork ("less formal papers"), the possibility of funding consumables, increase the daily allowance, allowing larger teams per project, clearer interaction between host institute and user, possibility to download a template with the required topics during application (user had to copy paste from the website to a word document) (note: a Microsoft Word version of the application form is now available via ARIA; the catalogue of services/technologies is provided in the guide to completing the application form).

4.2. TNA managers' feedback

4.2.1. Communication

Most TNA managers were satisfied with the visibility of their facility (average 4.2 out of 5). Two-thirds consider AE3 well promoted, and one-third suggest dissemination in conferences, social media, organising seminars, and videos – all of which are already done.

4.2.2. Suggestions to improve the selection procedure

Suggestions ordered according to priority (number of mentions): reduce the duration of the evaluation procedure, and improve ARIA including the option for TNA managers to request revision of applications (note: this has now been implemented).

4.2.3. Main challenges/suggestions when hosting TNA

Main challenges according to priority (number of mentions): combining start of trial with visit/fitting in with host research agenda/routine, a lot of paperwork/complex administration, ARIA functionality, TNA managers not being informed of approved proposals immediately (note: TNA managers are now in the cc of the message sent to applicants notifying them of the outcome of the selection panel).

4.2.4. Satisfaction with the impact of TNA on the facility

Most TNA managers were satisfied with the impact of TNA on their facility (average score 4.3 out of 5), with 80% very satisfied (4 to 5 score) and none unsatisfied (1 to 2 score). Most TNA managers (91%) considered TNAs to have increased or possibly stimulated R&D and increased scientific networking of

the facility. Indeed, all TNA managers indicated new opportunities through TNA, including new collaborations, networking and cooperation, knowledge exchange, new research and methodologies, development of analytical techniques, service improvements, and external services.

4.3. Reviewers feedback

4.3.1. Adequacy of information in TNA for evaluation

The reviewers are very satisfied with the information requested from the applicants for evaluation (average 4.3 out of 5). They also highly rate the guidance and scoring system provided (average 4.2 out of 5) and the administration of the TNA procedure (average 4.1 out of 5).

4.3.2. Satisfaction with the overall reviewing and suggestions

The reviewers consider the overall reviewing process very good (average 4.0 out of 5). They also made suggestions for improvement, including reviewers receiving notification of the outcome of the evaluation; improvements in the ARIA system (clearer indication of reviewer acceptance, the possibility of downloading a PDF version of the project [note: this is possible], more frequent reminders [note: there are weekly reminders], alignment of the submission form with the evaluation criteria); faster evaluation cycle where, for each criterion, there should be a minimum score for approval; more explicit guidance for SME applications where publication is not the primary concern.

5. Conclusions

Overall, compared to the first interim evaluation, there has been a marked improvement in the perception of ARIA functionality and satisfaction with TNA procedures and implementation. While some of the sources of dissatisfaction detected during the first interim report have not entirely gone away, there have been significant improvements in procedures and a progressive increase in submissions and visits as COVID-19 receded.

The communication about the TNA offer in AE3 can be considered adequate, although the fact that most users know about AE3 TNA through colleagues suggests that there could be room for improvement. However, there may also be a limit to direct communication, considering the large number of electronic communications scientists receive nowadays. A diversity of communications, as is currently done, may still be the best possible solution to communication.

Users consider information about available facilities and services clear and sufficient to decide which ones to use. This may be helped by the increased number of short videos on the AE3 website describing available facilities from various partners. The perception has not changed compared to the previous report. Reputation (perceived quality) of facilities and instrumentation and existing expertise (local collaboration) were the main factors (90%) considered by the applicants. TNA managers continue to feel that they should be more involved in the application process and suggest modifications to ARIA to facilitate implementation.

Most users considered the practical information provided for the applications and the ARIA system satisfactory, but some users considered the information insufficient. TNA managers also consider that ARIA needs improvements. As ARIA is subcontracted from INSTRUCT ERIC, this requires negotiations.

Users are satisfied with the feedback and the overall reviewing system in AE3. Following the project approval, users find the information provided by TNA managers very useful.

Overall, the users were highly satisfied with the application procedure. Besides making ARIA more practical, the main suggestions for improvement are shortening the lengthy reviewing process, simplifying paperwork (contracts), and clarifying all the steps required before the application process.

The TNA managers and Reviewers also consider the application procedure too lengthy and make concrete suggestions to facilitate communication with the applicants to facilitate the applications and project implementation through minor modifications in ARIA. TNA managers' general satisfaction level is high, justified by the start of new collaborations and the development of methodologies, among other benefits resulting from user visits.

Similarly, to what extent it is possible to simplify what has been considered by TNA managers as an "administrative burden" needs to be considered. For example, the award of licenses for animal experimentation varies between countries, and simplifying the process may not be possible.

Reviewers consider the reviewing procedure very good to excellent but suggest improvements to make it more transparent and efficient. These include being notified of the outcome of evaluations. Suggestions have also been made to improve ARIA, including the possibility of offline evaluation (PDF) and more frequent reminders.

In conclusion, there have been improvements in all stages of the TNA procedure, from the application to the evaluation and project development, resulting in an overall high satisfaction by those involved. However, some aspects still need to be addressed for a more efficient and timely delivery, in particular, a reduction of the evaluation cycle is considered a priority.

6. Appendix

6.1. User feedback

AQUAEXCEL 3.0: user feedback on TNA experience and recommendations for improvement
This is to obtain feedback and ideas for improvement after the initial calls for transnational access.
Users with not accepted projects or TNA still to be done

1) How did you find out about Aquaexcel 3.0 transnational access (TNA) calls?
2) Was it easy to decide which TNA facility to choose to develop your project?   If No, why Not?
3) How do you rate the practical information provided on how to apply for TNA during the pre-application process i.e., contacts with TNA managers with the proposal plans? (1 not useful-5 excellent, 6-did not read it)
4) At the stage of planning your TNA application were you in touch with the TNA manager of the facility you intended to apply?
5) If yes, how important was this interaction to prepare your application 1 poor-5 excellent 6 - Not applicable yet)
6) Did you use the Orientation Committee?
7) What 3 most important factors weighed more on your decision to choose a TNA facility
8) Which TNA facility did you choose?

9) Did you find the information about the services offered clear?   If no, what would help?
10) ARIA is the online application system used in Aquaexcel 3.0. Were you familiar with the use of ARIA?
11) How do you rate the practical information provided on registering and applying through ARIA? (1 not useful-5 excellent)
12) How user-friendly is ARIA? (1 not friendly-5 excellent)
13) Do you need help/further help in the use of ARIA?
14) Feedback - How useful was the reviewers feedback? (1 poor-5 excellent 6 - Not applicable yet)
15) How happy were you with the overall reviewing process? (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
18) Any other comments (positive or negative)?
19) Name (optional)
20) E-mail (optional)

Users with accepted projects or TNA done
1) How did you find out about Aquaexcel 3.0 transnational access (TNA) calls? If previous answer was "Other" where?
2) Was it easy to decide which TNA facility to choose to develop your project? If No, why Not?
3) How do you rate the practical information provided on how to apply for TNA during the pre-application process i.e., contacts with TNA managers with the proposal plans? (1 not useful-5 excellent, 6-did not read it)
4) At the stage of planning your TNA application were you in touch with the TNA manager of the facility you intended to apply? If yes, how important was this interaction to prepare your application 1 poor-5 excellent 6 - Not applicable yet)
5) Did you use the Orientation Committee?
6) What 3 most important factors weighed more on your decision to choose a TNA facility
7) Which TNA facility did you choose?
8) Did you find the information about the services offered clear? If no, what would help?
9) ARIA is the online application system used in Aquaexcel 3.0. Were you familiar with the use of ARIA?
10) How do you rate the practical information provided on registering and applying through ARIA? (1 not useful-5 excellent)
11) How user-friendly is ARIA? (1 not friendly-5 excellent)
12) Do you need help/further help in the use of ARIA?
13) How useful was the reviewer's feedback? (1 poor-5 excellent 6 - Not applicable yet)
14) How happy were you with the overall reviewing process? (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) Did you achieve the planned objectives? If no, can you indicate succinctly the reasons.
18) Please provide up to 3 proposals for improvement, if considered relevant
19) Any other comments (positive or negative)?
20) Name (optional)
21) E-mail (optional)

6.2. TNA manager feedback

Aquaexcel 3.0: TNA experience and recommendations for improvement (TNA managers). 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) Please suggest up to 3 improvements to the evaluation and selection procedure.
5) What are the main difficulties/challenges when hosting TNA?
6) Are you satisfied with the impact the TNA has on your facility? (1 not satisfied -5 very satisfied)
7) Have the TNA outputs stimulated new R&I / increased networking at your facility?
8) As a TNA provider what is the most important opportunity created by TNA at your facility/institute.
9) Name
10) 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) Is your Institute/University a member of AQUAEXCEL 3.0?
2) How do you rate the adequacy of information on which the TNA evaluation is based? (1 not satisfied -5 very satisfied)
3) How do you rate the guidance and scoring system provided? (1 poor-5 excellent)
4) How do you rate the administration of TNA evaluation? (1 poor-5 excellent)
5) How appropriate do you find the overall reviewing process? (1 poor-5 excellent)
6) Please, suggest up to 3 improvements to the TNA evaluation procedure.
7) Name
8) E-mail

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