Evaluation report of the development and organisation of the first ERA-PG call (2006)

Structuring Plant Genomic Research in Europe

Part I.   Call development and procedures
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Part I – Call development and procedures

1. Introduction

ERA-NET Plant Genomics (ERA-PG) is a network of 17 funding organisations from 14 European countries and Israel. ERA-PG was established in 2004, and its coordination is supported by the European Commission under the ERA-NET scheme of the 6th Framework Programme. Like other ERA-NETs, ERA-PG aims to strengthen the European Research Area through coordination and cooperation, and to launch a common call.

This report will provide an insight into how the ERA-PG First Call for Proposals (2006) came about. This part of the report will focus on the facts on which this call was built and on how the joint organisation proceeded. It will also act as the basis for improvements when developing the second call. Furthermore, this report may be of interest for all ERA-NETs and funding organisations which already have or are planning to launch common calls for research proposals. Also it serves as a report to the European Commission for their monitoring of ERA-NETs. The most relevant lessons that have been learned during the process are described during the relevant paragraphs.

The report describes in chronological order the major stages of the process addressing the questions why, what, and how things have been done. It will summarise the outcomes stepwise - enabling the analysis and assessment later on.

The reporting group have aimed to provide all necessary information completely, precisely and understandably for the reader but not to overload the report with too many details. In cases where the reader needs more information ERA-PG is happy to deliver additional information[1].

Actual facts and figures about the first call are presented in the publication "ERA-PG Research Programme Report 2006", available on the ERA-PG website.

1.1 Format

General format of chapters
- Objectives / aims of the step (intentions, different intentions, discrepancies in objectives between different funding organisations)
- Activities serving the objectives/aims (description of work, milestones)
- Results (description of output, deliverables)
- Lessons learned

1.2 Selected glossary

ERA-NET: a network of funding organisations from European Member States and Associated States aiming at cooperation and coordination of research activities carried out at national or regional level through: the networking of research activities conducted at national or regional level, and the mutual opening of national and regional research programmes.

ERA-PG: European Research Area Network (ERA-NET) in Plant Genomics

Network Steering Committee (NSC): the Committee of high level representatives from the partners of ERA-PG – Highest decision taking body

General Assembly: meeting of all representatives of the partners of ERA-PG to present the results, ongoing and future activities of the network (usually takes place once a year)

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[1] Please contact the ERA-PG Call Secretariat (see www.erapg.org)

Call Secretariat (CS): secretariat installed to provide central documentation, communication and execution of the call administration

National Call Coordinator (NCC): contact person with the task of programme officer appointed by the funding agency

Call Coordination Team (CCT): team composed by all the National Call Coordinators

Programme Board: board of scientific experts proposed by the funding organisations and appointed by the NSC

Funding organisation: the national funding body taking care of funding the research teams of its own country/region independently from its nature (agency, council, ministry, foundation, academy…)

2. The first steps towards the joint call (preparation and development)

2.1 Initial idea

One of the main objectives of ERA-PG was to launch joint calls and achieve a common funding of research activities in plant genomics in Europe. In the Description of Work (annex of the ERA-PG Contract established in September 2003) several synchronised joint calls for proposals and common review approaches were foreseen for 2005 with the participation of a limited number of funding organisations. After some months of collaborative work, all partners of ERA-PG planned one large joint call launched in 2006 to which the majority of partners contributed financially.

2.2 Background information

All necessary background information for starting the preparatory work was generated during the first one and half years of ERA-PG in which an overview about all ongoing national activities in plant genomics research funding, structures, capacities, etc. was generated[2]. Thematic contents as well as administrative features of the funding were characterised for each funding organisation. Thereby awareness was raised with respect to the national framework conditions and priorities in each funding organisation.

During the discussion and the implementation of the joint call for proposals, a study was undertaken to identify possible barriers for a common research programme and transnational collaborations in administrative, financial and legal aspects. One main conclusion was that no major barriers to hinder the implementation of a common programme[3].

Lessons learned:
- Better mutual understanding was achieved through information exchange (meetings, intranet, working groups)
- This study of potential barriers did not avoid the emergence of unexpected difficulties.

2.3 'Funders Meeting'

In a subsequent step, the partners discussed the potential participation in joint research funding activities. Multiple bi-, tri- and multilateral meetings (approximately 15) took place before a 'funders meeting' was arranged with all – at that time - interested funding organisations (April 2005). The availability of resources and the timing of funding played the major role in the discussion of this first funders meeting. At the end of this milestone meeting a few fundamental principles had already been agreed:

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[2] ERA-PG survey report: 'Plant Genomics Research in Europe' (2005) – see website, section Report WP1
[3] ERA-PG report 'In search of best practices for common evaluation and shared trans-national administration' (2006) – see website, section Report WP 2.2

- Transparency of procedures
- Straight forward and simple methods for administration and applicants
- Synchrony between all funding organisations
- Centralised call management (organisation/location to be defined)
- Basic timeline for issuing the call and funding of projects
- Some national budget commitments
- Working groups should further develop specific aspects of the call procedure

It was apparent from the individual objectives of the funding organisations that plans/ideas fell into two strategies:

- One group was in favour of a broad and inclusive call mainly for academic institutions with no requirement to include company participation in the projects (Sub Call A)
- The other group was in favour of application oriented funding with considerable industrial participation, public-private partnerships, and based on the previous trilateral experiences of France, Germany, and Spain (Sub Call B)
- Some funding organisations agreed with both strategies

The participating funding agencies wanted to have one common call and common management despite of this conceptual difference.

2.4 Partners and their financial commitments

As a result of original agreements and negotiations 12 organisations from 11 countries participated in the ERA-PG 1st call (see Appendix 1). This comprised a total prelimnary allocated budget maximum of up to 32.5 million euros at the preparatory phase.

The two strategic approaches resulted in the establishment of two sub calls: In Sub Call A (for academic consortia) the consortium had to minimally include three public partners from financially contributing ERA-PG countries. In the Sub Call B (for public-private consortia) a minimum number of two public partners and in addition to this at least one private partner were needed to make the consortium valid. Both Sub Calls were open also for additional research partners from other countries (e.g. without representation in ERA-PG) if they brought their own funds and demonstrated true added value to the partnership.

Lessons learned:
- Participation of many countries enlarged the possible combinations of cooperation between researchers
- The budget allocated in the beginning was increased by a number of funding agencies after the review process to allow funding of the 29 highest ranked proposals.

Based on these fundamentals the next major step was organising workshops with the aim to establish the details of the call design. The 'Norwich Workshop'[4] hosted by BBSRC (United Kingdom) in June 2005 marked another important milestone of the overall process. 80 experts from all ERA-PG countries representing academia, industry, administration, Technology Platform "Plants for the Future" (TP PftF) etc. had been invited to prepare
- Themes for a call (in specific round tables per overall subjects, e.g.: technologies, crops…)

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[4] See also on the ERA-PG website the 'Planning workshop'

- Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) regulations (the existence of several networks in plant genomics with their own IPR regulations gave an impulse to discuss IPR regulations)
- Administrative approaches (including number of stages, evaluation procedure)

This step was concluded by a General Assembly where the specifics of the call (the outcome of the workshop and break-out sessions) were presented as:

↳ The programme will use a two-stage call process: first a call for pre-proposals of pre-built consortia, followed by a call for full proposals.

↳ Proposals must involve at least 3 countries.

↳ There will be one call paper for all countries, but it may have national annexes.

↳ Pre-proposals will be submitted to a single point (programme secretariat).

↳ Pre-proposals will be evaluated by a panel of scientists nominated by the funding organisation.

↳ Selected consortia are invited to submit a full proposal and to attend an information/partnering meeting.

↳ Each proposal is evaluated by 2 or 3 external referees suggested by the Evaluation Panel.

↳ Selected participants will have to settle a subsidy agreement and conditions with their respective national funding organisation.

↳ The partners of the Collaborative Research Project must sign an ERA-PG programme Consortium Agreement.

Lessons learned:
- The topics were introduced in a workshop and defined in break-out sessions; this was appreciated by the scientists and administrators
- The definition of the topics should provide enough flexibility in themes for scientists to propose new and innovative ideas but allow funding agencies national strategic objectives to be fulfilled in the frame of transnational collaborations
- Broad topics eased the commitment of some of the funding agencies in this First Call; though others would have preferred a more focused call.
- The themes/topics were also in alignment with the objectives of other strategic groups in plant science in Europe, including the Technology Platform Plants for the Future, and this coordination with third parties may be further strengthened.

3. Operational units (implementation)

At this stage it became necessary to develop and implement efficient procedures and structures able to manage all the upcoming activities with relation to the call.

- Call Coordination Team (CCT) consisting of National Call Coordinators (NCCs)
- Call Secretariat (CS)
- Different national implementation procedures
- Time schedule of the call process

These procedure and structures were supported by documents describing their respective role and functions and brought together with the overall call procedure by the Network Steering Committee of ERA-PG in September 2005.
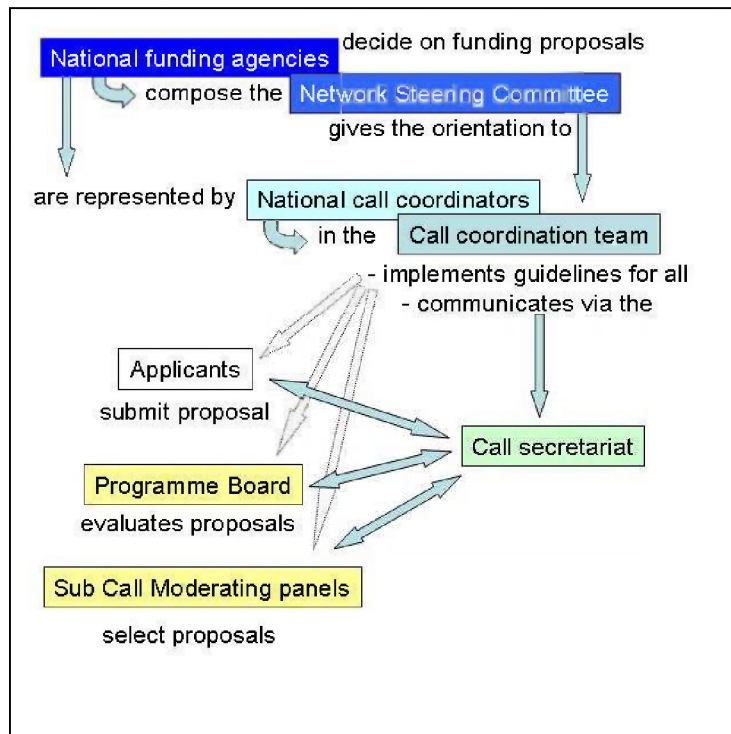
Figure 1. Call Organisation chart

3.1 National Call Coordinators and Call Coordination Team

The contributing organisations have appointed National Call Coordinators to form a Call Coordination Team. The National Call Coordinators are the executive programme managers for their respective organisations. The team has jointly prepared the call. The Call Coordination Team is responsible for the management and documentation of the respective procedures, for a streamlined process during the evaluation and selection of pre-proposals and full proposals, and for consecutive activities with respect to the resulting Collaborative Research Projects.

3.2 Call Secretariat

The Call Secretariat has been installed in order to provide central management and documentation of the respective procedures and safeguarding the flow of information during the evaluation and selection of the proposals and consecutive activities with respect to the resulting Collaborative Research Projects. The Call Secretariat supports the activities of the External Referees, the Programme Board, the Moderating Panels and the Network Steering Committee. The Call Secretariat collected and stored all relevant information and provided it to the respective boards, panels and individuals as needed for the evaluation and selection. The Call Secretariat is supported with funds of the ERA-NET.

3.3 Funding agencies and Network Steering Committee (NSC)

The National Funding Agencies are national organisations of the member states that participate in the network. They administer the allocated budget of the respective countries. The members of the Network Steering Committee duly represent the National Funding Bodies who appointed them. The NSC steers the process. Major proposals from the Call Coordination Team need NSC approval.

Lessons learned:
- The Call Coordination Team represents real European cooperation as it brings together all the NCCs and is a good forum for discussion and reaching consensus
- without a strong group of administrative experts and relatively frequent meetings (one per trimester) the speed and efficiency of ERA-PG would not have been achieved
- a common Call Secretariat was crucial in order to facilitate the handling of the proposals
- a common Call Secretariat guaranteed harmonising the call procedures already in the First Call, ERA-PG is probably one of the forerunners among ERA-NETs in this sense.

4. Process description

4.1 General overview

The general outline is given in Figure 2.
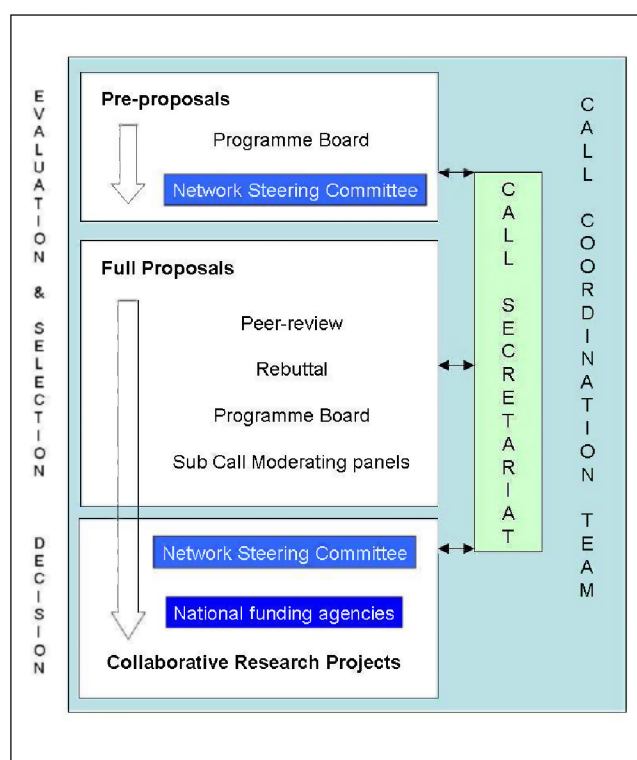
Figure 2. general overview of evaluation

4.2 Confidentiality and Impartiality check

Handling of the applications and all steps of the evaluation and selection process is conducted with appropriate confidentiality, objectivity and transparency. Therefore members of the Programme Board, Moderating Panels, Network Steering Committee, the External Referees, and the Call Coordination Team and Call Secretariat themselves are requested to act according to the Code of Conduct on Conflicts of

Interest and to sign the Declaration on Confidentiality and Impartiality. These documents were established by the Call Coordination Team.

4.3 Call Notice

4.3.1 Pre-announcement

In the second half of 2005 a delay in the implementation of the call became apparent. In order to give applicants enough time for the preparation of their proposals and to find partners for their project consortia a pre-announcement was issued (December 2005). This was not binding for the funding organisations in a legal way but was expressing their strong intention to participate in the call.
Publication of intention and basic information on the call

- Structures (Sub Call A + B) and contributions
- National Annexes
- Timeline
- Contacts

4.3.2 Announcement

The Call notice was established in February 2006 by the Call Coordination Team in order to lay down the ambitions of the First Call, the objectives, topics and a framework of the assessment procedures. The process consisted of a series of drafting and reviewing steps by several members of the Call Coordination Team. All steps were discussed by e-mail, intranet and during Call Coordination Team meetings. Final approval of the document was obtained from the Network Steering Committee.

For legal reasons a few national calls had to be launched simultaneously with the launch of the ERA-PG call (f.i. by ANR in France, BMBF in Germany and MUR in Italy).

Lessons learned:
- The Call notice is a very important common document. The later work and more detailed documents were based on what was already agreed in the Call notice.
- However, there were some complicating factors (e.g. how to handle a common procedure with two Sub Calls) when agreeing on the document.
- The synchronisation of the transnational call with the national calls is crucial to avoid delays in the decision making process.

4.4 Implementation

4.4.1 Launch

The Call Notice was published broadly (announcements and direct mailing by funding organisations, on the ERA-PG website and the websites of the national funding organisations, on the website of the European Commission, during meetings and conferences). It described the ambition, structure and organisation of the call. National annexes were published together with the Call Notice. These documents described the commitments, the budget allocations and the additional national requirements of the contributing funding-bodies and agencies towards the joint call for the applicants.

The Call Coordination Team and the Call Secretariat were available to answer to questions from applicants.

Lessons learned:
- From the feedback received by the Call Coordination Team and the number of pre-proposals submitted (more than one hundred) it appeared that the First Call had been sufficiently communicated to the scientific community in the partner countries. A more detailed query will be defined in part II of this report
- The national annexes were a very efficient tool to address the sometimes very different national requirements without disrupting the structure of the Call Notice.

4.4.2 Two stage procedure

Objectives of the two-stage procedure were
1. To check that the pre-proposals fit within the scientific objectives and requirements of the First Call.
2. To reduce the overall workload for the applicants and the evaluators.
3. To establish the overall application-load in different areas;
4. To create a possibility to combine similar research efforts, based on the advice of the Programme Board;

The pre-selection step by the Programme Board resulted in an overall reduction of 1/3 of the total 107 proposals submitted.

Lessons learned:
- The two-step procedure was useful to identify appropriate pre-proposals for the Call and especially Sub Calls (in terms of science and composition of consortia)
- In view of the large number of proposals received at the first step, the two-step-procedure was useful to to reduce the workload for applicants as well as for the evaluation process.
- It is important to have a detailed document defining the selection procedures agreed upon by all partners and to communicate the selection procedures to the Programme Board sufficiently in advance of the meeting.
- The Programme Board recommended once to merge two similar research pre-proposals.

4.5 Pre-proposals

4.5.1 Submission

Guidelines for application of pre-proposals and an application form were established by the Call Coordination Team. They were made available to the applicants via the ERA-PG website. The CCT, the Call Secretariat and the technical helpdesk remained stand-by to answer questions from applicants or to solve technical problems.

The consortia submitted the pre-proposals to the IRIS electronic submission platform that is hosted by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research.

After submission an overview and the electronic files of the applications have been made available to the Call Coordination Team on the intranet by the Call Secretariat for an eligibility check by the National Call Coordinators.

Lessons learned:
  - The registration of the applying non-Dutch organisations to the IRIS database by the Call Secretariat took more time than foreseen.
  - The intranet again proved to be a useful tool for communication about eligibility of applications
  - The electronic submission platform worked well; no major obstacles were encountered by the applicants. The platform was flexible, there was a possibility to upload documents and some freedom in writing the details of the application.

4.5.2 Evaluation

The pre-proposals were made available to the Programme Board through a download-platform. The members of the Programme Board assessed the pre-proposals according to the Guidelines for Evaluation and Selection prepared by the Call Coordination Team in March 2006. The individual scores and comments of the members of the Programme Board were used to establish a preview that served as input for the Programme Board meeting. All pre-proposals were discussed by the Board in numerical order resulting sometimes in an adjustment of the initial rating and resulting in a final list of proposals that were recommended to submit a full proposal. The final list and a compilation of the comments of the Programme Board were communicated to the Call Coordination Team to serve as a basis for the letters to be sent to the applicants and the feedback that should be given upon request.

Lessons learned:
  - Advance scoring and written comments by the Board were perceived positively; however it would have been preferable if proposals had been assigned to three instead of two readers in order to better solve discrepancies.

4.5.3 Invitation for full proposal submission

The aim of the pre-proposal step was to select the applications which satisfy the formal criteria of the call and which demonstrate the potential to submit a competitive full proposal .

Due to a different interpretation of the objective of the pre-proposal step (reduction of number of applications versus appropriateness of the application with regards to the Sub Call requirements) by the participating funding agencies, the recommendations of the Programme Board regarding the Sub Call A proposals were approved by the NSC while those regarding the Sub Call B proposals were adjusted in order to invite for latter Sub Call all consortia to submit a full proposal, except for the few which were out of scope.

The consortia were informed by the Call Secretariat about the outcome of their pre-proposals assessment. In the letter the numbers of pre-proposals in each rating group were mentioned. The invited consortia had six weeks to prepare a full proposal.

Lessons learned:
  - The ambitions of the two Sub Calls were different. This caused discrepancies in the preparation-phase of the common Guidelines for Evaluation and Selection (definition of criteria and scoring ranges) and hampered the instruction of the Programme Board who was supposed to assess both types of proposals in different ways. In future two separate assessment boards should be considered in case of a subdivided call.
  - Guidelines should be approved before the launch of the Call. The approval procedure (who should approve what and when) for such documents should be detailed.

4.6 Full proposals

4.6.1 Submission/Application

After the full proposals had been registered and made available to the National Call Coordinators through a closed section of ERA-PG's intranet, the Call Secretariat and National Call Coordinators checked the eligibility of each proposal and of each participant within the consortia.

The aim of the full proposal eligibility check was to identify early in the process those applications that did not fulfil the minimum formal requirements to qualify as a full proposal. Full proposals found ineligible were excluded from the next evaluation steps. Full proposals failed the eligibility check in case of insufficient partnership (country participation), arrival after deadline, incompleteness, proposal not complying with criteria for text format and length or partners not fulfilling national eligibility criteria for grants.

In the cases where the proposal (partly) failed some of the eligibility requirements the Call Secretariat and National Call Coordinators concerned contacted each other and resolved the question whether or not to include a proposal in the evaluation procedure. There were a few consortia in which not all applicants were eligible for funding. After careful consideration it was decided not to exclude these applications from further processing, but to ask the consortia to resolve the issue at the rebuttal phase or before a final funding decision is to be taken. The Call Secretariat notified the main applicant. The external referees for the proposals concerned were informed of the specific situation.

Lessons learned:
- The intranet was a useful management tool to support the National Call Coordinators to solve transnational issues.
- Flexibility in solving eligibility questions proved to be essential
- Flexibility in changes of proposals from the pre-proposal to the full proposal phase was appreciated.

4.6.2 Evaluation

The evaluation of full proposals consisted of two steps: 1. peer review; 2. assessment by Programme Board and additionally by the Sub Call Moderating Panels. The Programme Board had been selected from the scientific community by the countries participating in the call and had been extended (to implicate the new four partners of ERA-PG[5] in the call process) for the assessment of the full proposals. Experts within this Programme Board were selected to cover the topics in both Sub Calls. The Programme Board was headed by an independent chairperson. Final agreement on the extension of the Programme Board was reached by the Network Steering Committee.

Guidelines for Evaluation and Selection as well as Evaluation sheets for external peers have been established jointly by the Call Coordination Team.

Lessons learned:
- Guidelines for evaluation and selection should be completed before the launch of the call
- All partners should communicate their ambitions clearly at an early stage of the preparation of the call and find consensus about the procedures and aims of each step before the call is launched
- Subdividing a call complicates this process; when ambitions differ that much two separate calls would be preferable

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[5] In 2005, ERA-PG proposes an extension with four new partners (Israel, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland). This extension was officially adopted by the European Commission in 2006.

a. Peer review

The aim of the external peer review step was to provide independent in-depth judgements about the full proposals. This provided the basis for the assessment by the Programme Board.

In Sub Call A the Programme Board members were asked to suggest appropriate External Referees for evaluation of the full proposals. Some National Call Coordinators delivered input too.

In Sub Call B the Programme Board together with some members of the Sub Call Moderating Panel and supported by National Call Coordinators suggested names of referees.

The applicant had the possibility to indicate External Referees that should not review their proposal.

The Call Secretariat used these inputs to make the allocation of the proposals to External Referees and sent out all necessary information including call-specific evaluation forms and for Sub Call B a specific briefing. All correspondence with the peers was conducted by the Call Secretariat. External Referees were requested to inform the Call Secretariat whether they were available, capable and had no conflicts of interest as soon as possible by returning the reply form and the declaration of confidentiality and impartiality. After receiving a positive answer the full proposal was sent to the External Referee.

The External Referees were asked to evaluate the complete full proposals assigned to him/her, using a Sub Call specific evaluation form that covers all evaluation criteria as defined in the Call Notice, and to attribute an overall score. A minimum of five experts were asked to read each proposal with the aim to obtain at least three referee reports. In case three or more declined the request, additional experts were asked. Some experts evaluated more than one proposal, but most experts were assigned only one.

Lessons learned:
- The procedure of consulting members of the Programme Board and occasionally the National Call Coordinators was satisfactory.
- The suggestions made by the applicants were helpful too.
- Checking potential conflicts of interest of referees with large international consortia in advance involves a huge workload that could be avoided by asking every referee to return a signed declaration of confidentiality and impartiality after having read the composition of the consortium and the abstract of the proposal.
- To organise the peer review during the summer period may require a longer time period than during the rest of the year.

b. Rebuttal

The evaluation reports by the External Referees were sent anonymously to the main applicant who in a rebuttal, on behalf of the consortium, may comment on the External Referees' reports (with a limited number of words and only in case the applicant wants to make comments). The aim of the rebuttal step was to serve as an additional source of information for the Programme Board to resolve uncertainties that may arise when reading the External Referees reports.

Lessons learned:
- Although the rebuttal step was quite an unusual tool in many partner countries it appeared to be very helpful for the Programme Board during their discussions. The applicants perceived it very positively.
- In Sub Call B it allowed the Programme Board to identify one External Referee as direct competitor of the applicant and therefore exclude this External Referees evaluation.

c. Assessment by the Programme Board

The full proposals, evaluation reports and rebuttals were forwarded by the Call Secretariat to the members of the Programme Board. The work of the Programme Board was to provide a consolidated evaluation summary and rating for each proposal and a recommendation for funding. A grouped list approach was applied. The outcome of the evaluation process was forwarded to the representatives of the funding bodies who met the day after the Programme Board meeting.

The final result of the Programme Board meeting was a consolidated evaluation summary of each proposal and a grouped list based on agreed judgement. This was used for documentation and as basis for the Sub Call Moderating Panels. All the results were forwarded to the Sub Call Moderating Panels by the Call Secretariat.

Lessons learned:
- Though the overall input of written comments by the Programme Board was satisfactory, the individual contribution from the members was sometimes heterogeneous.
- Finalisation of a summary of the assessment per individual proposal should be well scheduled; sufficient attention should be paid to the procedure for final approval of the summaries

d. Assessment by the Sub Call Moderating Panels

The Sub Call Moderating panels had different tasks due to the different ambitions of the two Sub Calls. The panels acted accordingly. As a result the discussion between the members of the Moderating Panels yielded a consensual list of fundable projects that fitted into the budgetary constraints of the call.

Lessons learned:
- A discussion between funding agencies (gathered in the Moderating Panels) after the evaluation of the full proposals is necessary in order to agree on the proposals to be selected by each funding agency. It gives a clear vision of the "borderline" proposals and shows the financial limitations of each funding agency. This is important to eventually maximise the financial commitment of the funding agencies in the transnational programme.

4.7. Collaborative Research Projects

4.7.1 Funding decision

The outcome of the Moderating Panel meetings was communicated by the Call Secretariat to the Network Steering Committee that brings together the funding organisations.

The final funding decision about the recommended proposals rested with the national funding organisations that contributed to Sub Call A or B. After the approval of the funding organisation the respective Network Steering Committee members and National Call Coordinators took the necessary actions within their funding organisation to implement the grant as soon as possible after the Moderating Panel meeting. In some countries the selected applicants had to submit their application to the national funding organisation, in other countries this was not necessary. In most countries the grants were re-awarded by decision of a board responsible for the plant sciences research field. Due to the differences in duration of the national procedures a delay in the common funding decision process appeared. This turned

out to be a complicating factor in view of the objective of synchronised start of the Collaborative Research Projects (as far as possible).

Our experience shows that after a common decision on selection of Collaborative Research Projects six months is a reasonable period of time in which projects should be announced.

Note: Some organisations have indicated in the call preparation that it may be required to grant the projects before the end of 2006 in order to preserve the budget. Therefore, in case this would be required, there should be flexibility in the system for this to occur, and it might be necessary for applicants to revise their work plans to allow a staggered start of the project such that funds could be released in time. These revisions should be agreed within the research consortia and with the funding organisations who may consult relevant Programme Board members.

Lessons learned:
- Conflicting national needs of granting the Collaborative Research Projects (selected and funded full proposals) before a given date and of applying an additional extended national review procedure of the applications may create difficulties, substantial delays and, in the most extreme cases, deadlocks.
- Efforts should be made to prevent such situations, through requesting a stronger initial commitment to follow the common rules, or through creating a more flexible approach which allows for staggered application processing and project starting. It should be stated that in the case of ERA-PG most of the funding organisations adapted their national procedures to the commonly agreed scheme. In case legal constraints do not allow adaptation this should be anticipated in an early stage to circumvent delays.

4.7.2 Communication to applicants

The Call Secretariat informed the consortia about the outcome of the assessment, by letter to the main applicant. Four different letters were sent to the respective main applicants:

- Letter 1: Consortium recommended for funding
- Letter 2: Consortium on the reserve list (Consortium recommended for funding depending on availability of additional budget from the funding agencies)
- Letter 3: Consortium considered of high international quality but due to the competitive nature of this call there were insufficient funds to support the consortium
- Letter 4: Not recommended for funding

The national decisions were communicated to the Call Secretariat that then informed all National Call Coordinators involved, and the main applicants. The outcomes of peer review, Programme Board and Moderating Panel steps, have to remain confidential until all concerned funding organisations have taken their national funding decisions. Again, if a funding agency has a longer national procedure, the funding decisions are communicated later.

Lessons learned:
- The applicants should enter into negotiation about the administrative process with their corresponding national funding organisations/authorities as soon as possible to favour flexibility in the starting date of the CRP.

4.7.3 Start of the Collaborative Research Projects

Projects were expected to start between March and June 2007. Due to a delay in the decision making process of some partners and the subsequent recruitment of people for some projects resulted in later starting dates.

Part II – Applicant questionnaire

1. Web-based questionnaire

An application questionnaire was built with a web interface. Applicants were asked to provide the answers through the online questionnaire. The questionnare is attached as Appendix 2.
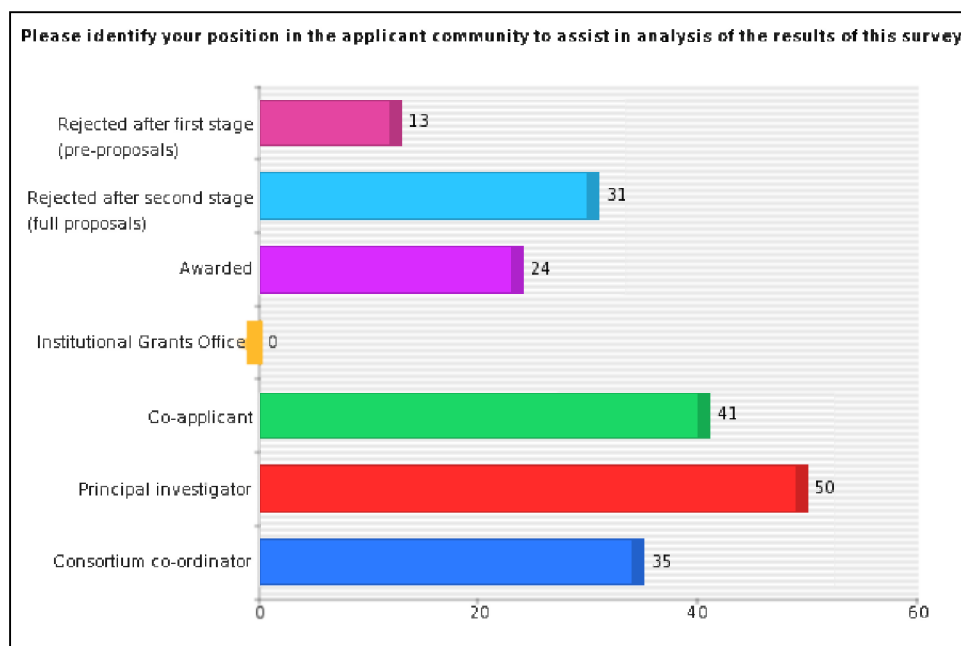
2. Analysis of the response

2.1 Introduction

Following the launch and implementation of the first transnational call for proposals in 2006 funding organisations around and beyond Europe are currently planning a second call under the umbrella of the European Research Area in Plant Genomics. In order to help improve the process where appropriate the Call Co-ordination Team gathered feedback on the experiences of those involved in the First Call. To this end an internet-based questionnaire was designed. We had a list of 528 unique individuals of the applicant community with a valid e-mail address, of which 30 appeared no longer contactable. The remaining 498 consisted of both main applicants (96) and co-applicants (402) of the pre-proposal phase.

   Completion of the questionnaire was in confidence. The requests were sent on November 12th 2007 and the deadline for completion was 30th November 2007. 107 responders submitted their comments. The overall response was 22% and the number of responders per country corresponded to the number of applicants who were involved in the call. Though not all responders indicated whether or not their proposal was awarded the population of responders contained at least 44 rejected and 24 awarded as is shown in the table below.

	Applicants	Responders	Ratio R/A
DE	156	31	20%
ES	84	21	25%
UK	83	14	17%
FR	73	10	14%
NL	45	11	24%
IT	35	7	20%
DK	32	6	19%
FI	20	1	5%
PT	19	4	21%
NO	8	0	0%
CH	4	0	0%
SE	3	0	0%
IL	1	1	100%
RU	1	1	100%
AT	1	0	0%
IR	1	0	0%
HU	1	0	0%
JP	1	0	0%
CZ	1	0	0%
USA	1	0	0%
VIE	1	0	0%
Total	571	107	

Please identify your position in the applicant community to assist in analysis of the results of this survey.

Position	Value
Rejected after first stage (pre-proposals)	13
Rejected after second stage (full proposals)	31
Awarded	24
Institutional Grants Office	0
Co-applicant	41
Principal investigator	50
Consortium co-ordinator	35

2.2 Results

Based on the received feedback the following trends were identified in the perception of the call and its procedures.

Announcement and instructions about the call
More than half of the responders indicated that they found out about the call through personal communication rather than via the website, national call coordinators or national funding organisations.

Clarity of the call notice and instructions
The Call Notice and instructions to the applicants were clear.

Thematic content of the call
The majority of the responders were quite happy with the broad thematic scope of the call.

Evaluation and selection
- The services rendered to the applicants by the Call Secretariat and the National Call Co-ordinators were received well by many responders.
- The opportunity to respond to the reviewers comments was highly appreciated by the responders.
- The feedback that was received from the Programme Board discussions sometimes lacked the detail that would enable the applicants to improve their proposal

Communication about the outcome
In general the communication was good to excellent according to more than 70% of the responders.
It was felt by some responders that final approval of the project should be more synchronised between the different countries. This would increase the speed of the procedure.

International collaboration
Through this transnational call for proposals more than 20% of the responders initiated new collaborations.

The responders who requested further assistance brought up the following issues they encountered after their projects had been selected for funding:

- In some countries there was an additional evaluation procedure that delayed the start of the project.
- In some cases the grants of some of the members of a consortium were reduced by the funding agencies after the project was selected. This was felt as a drawback for carrying out the work plan.
- Final decision making processes of the different funding partners should be better synchronised
- Assistance with negotiation of the Consortium Agreement would be welcomed by some responders.

2.3 Graphs showing the response to the questions

The online response to the different questions was gathered and illustrated by the following graphs. The response is divided into different categories.

2.3.1 Announcement and instructions about the call
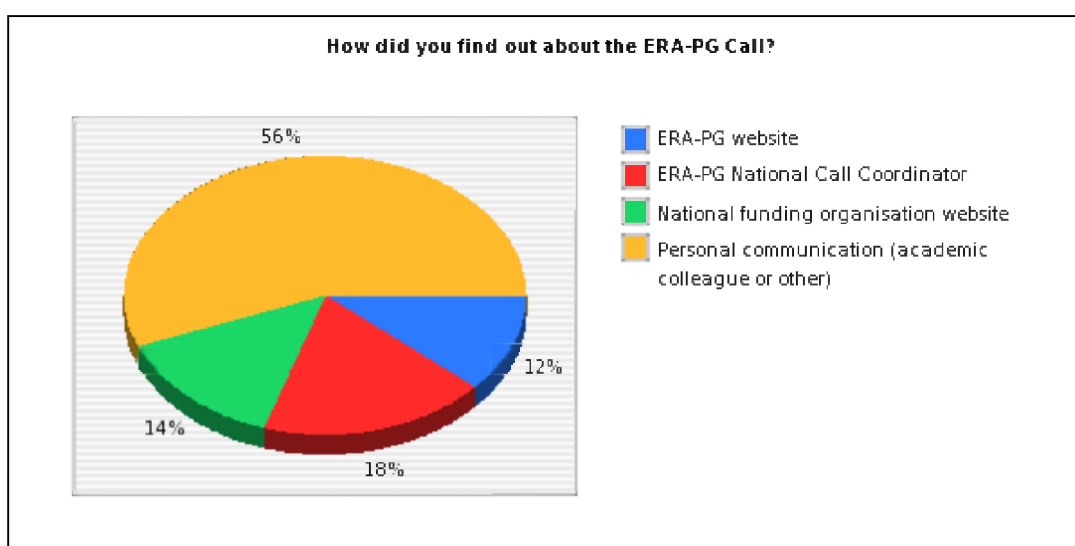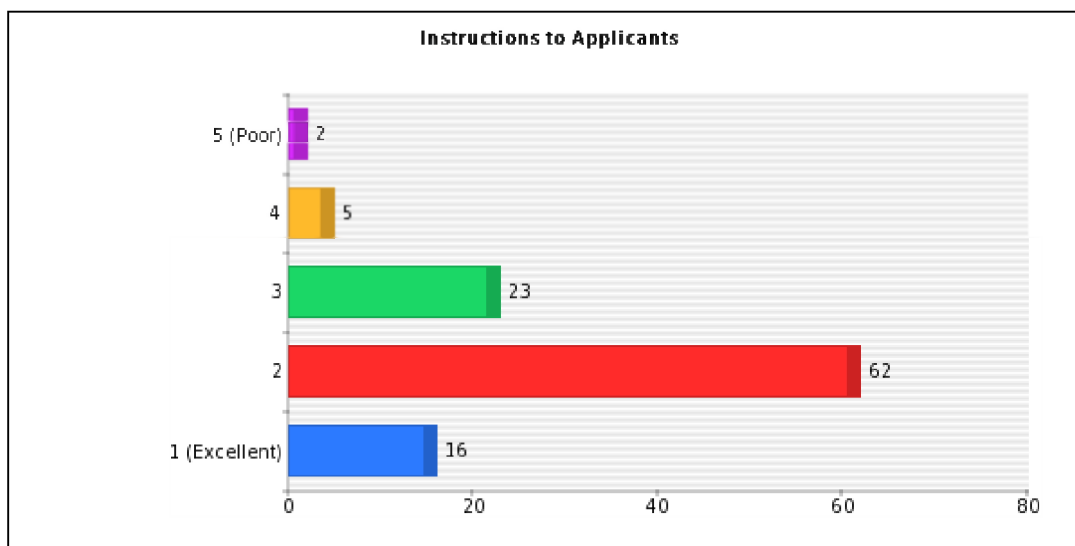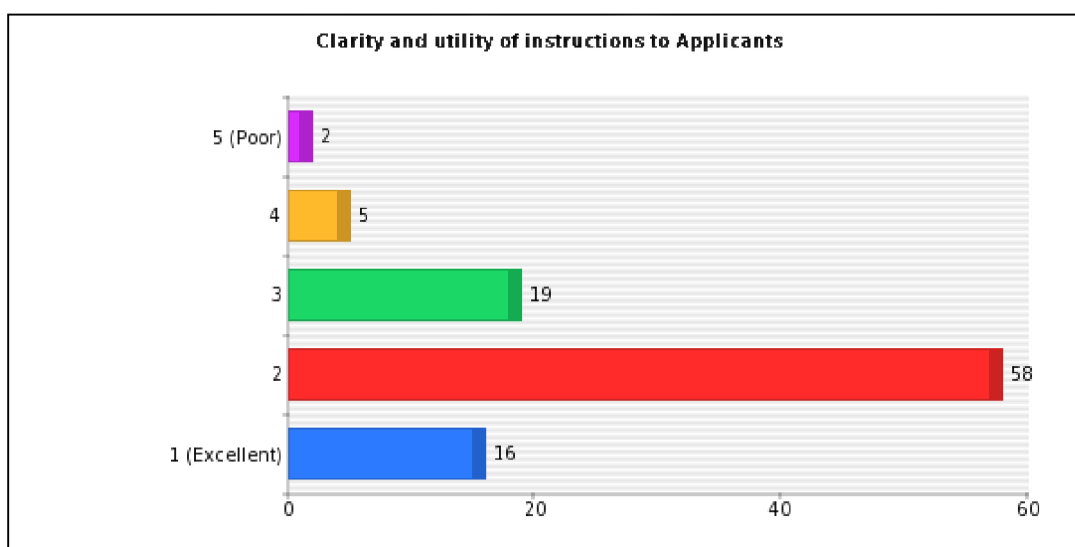

The majority of the responders were informed about the call for proposals through a personal communication.
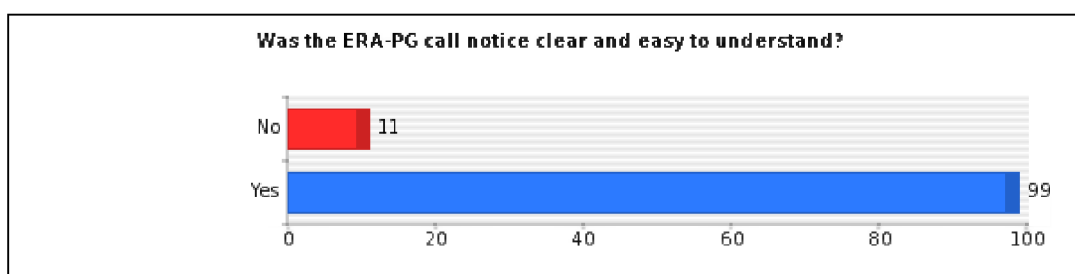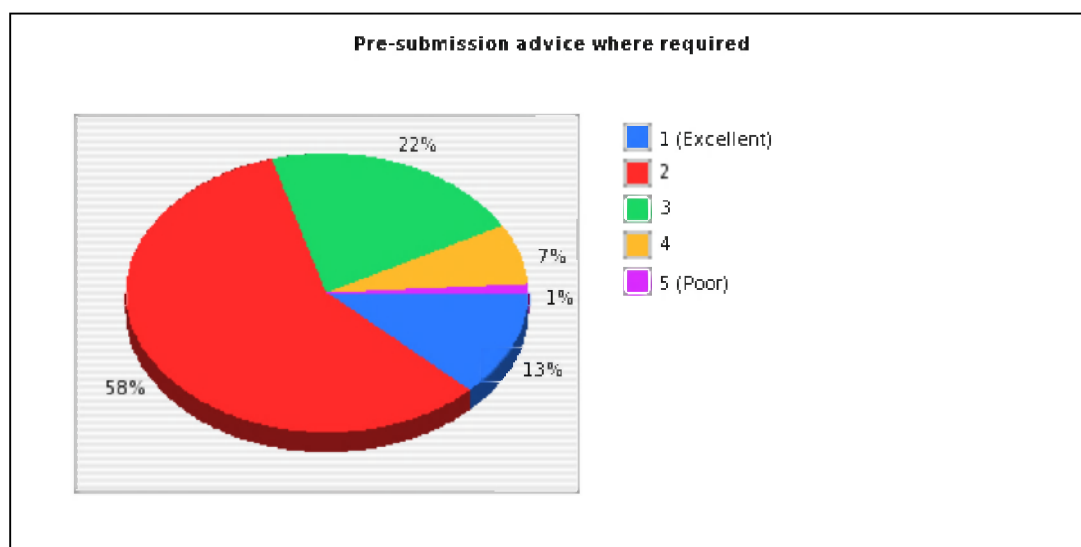

The call notice was written sufficiently clear and the scope was considered broad enough according to the majority of the responders.

Did you feel the ERA-PG call notice was sufficiently inclusive for the applicant community?

No	10
Yes	98
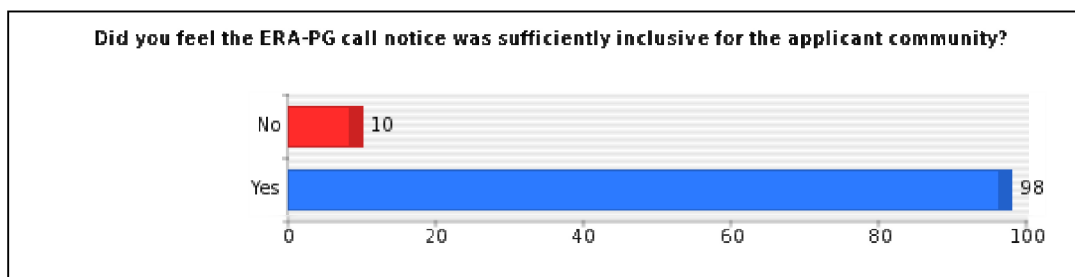
The "no"responders felt the restricted number of participating countries in either SubCall A or Sub Call B was a drawback for trans-European collaboration.

Clarity and utility of instructions to Applicants

5 (Poor)	2
4	5
3	19
2	58
1 (Excellent)	16

Instructions to Applicants

5 (Poor)	2
4	5
3	23
2	62
1 (Excellent)	16

The majority of the responders were rather satisfied with the guidelines they received for applying for this grant.

Notification on receipt of application

- 1 (Excellent)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Poor)

46%
9%
4%
0%
41%

Pre-submission advice where required

- 1 (Excellent)
- 2
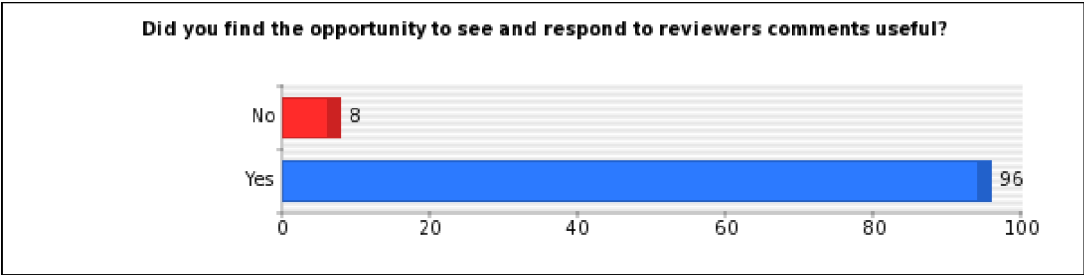- 3
- 4
- 5 (Poor)

22%
7%
1%
58%
13%
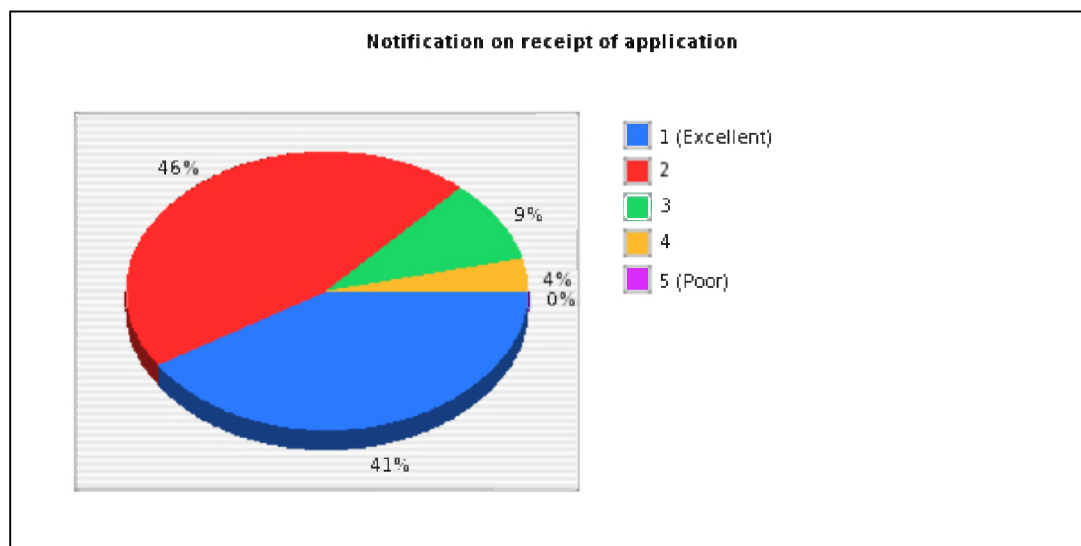
Notification of receipt and guidance towards successful submission were well appreciated by the responders community.

2.3.2. Call evaluation and selection procedures
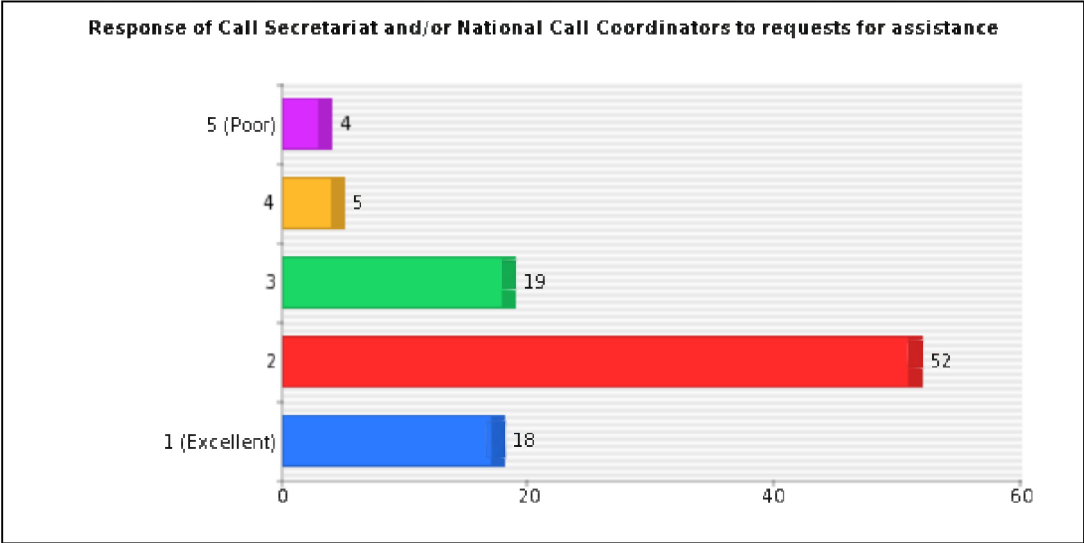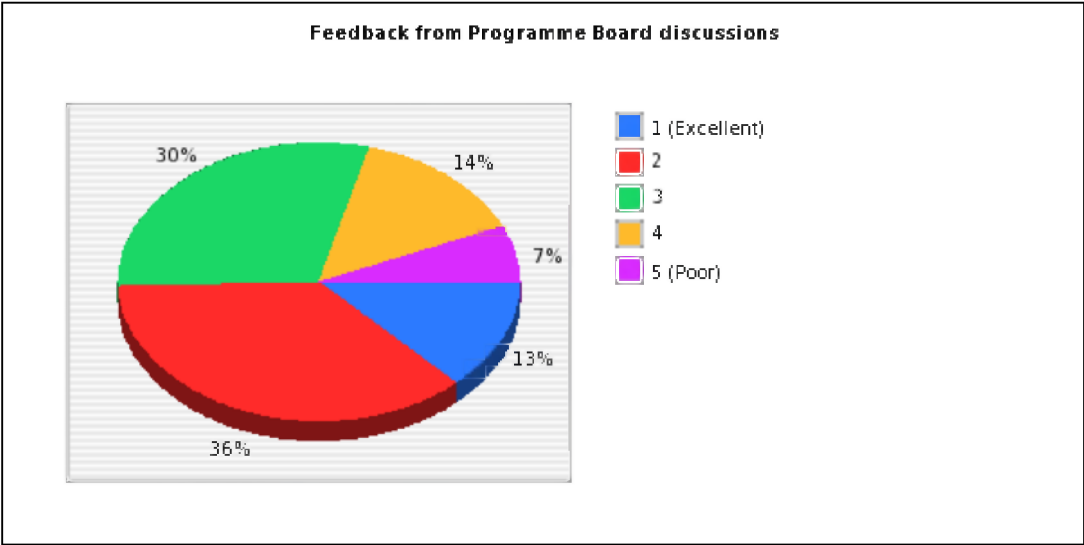
Response of Call Secretariat and/or National Call Coordinators to requests for assistance

Rating	Value
5 (Poor)	4
4	5
3	19
2	52
1 (Excellent)	18

The services rendered to the applicants by the Call Secretariat and the National Call Co-ordinators were received well by many responders.

Did you find the opportunity to see and respond to reviewers comments useful?

Response	Value
No	8
Yes	96

The opportunity to respond to the reviewers comments was highly appreciated by the responders.

Feedback from Programme Board discussions

- 1 (Excellent): 13%
- 2: 36%
- 3: 30%
- 4: 14%
- 5 (Poor): 7%

The feedback that was received from the Programme Board discussions sometimes lacked the detail that would enable the applicants to improve their proposal.

Feedback from panel discussions

Rating	Value
5 (Poor)	15
4	11
3	25
2	38
1 (Excellent)	8

Notification of panel decision

Rating	Value
5 (Poor)	5
4	13
3	21
2	43
1 (Excellent)	16

Notification of decision

Rating	Value
5 (Poor)	5
4	11
3	23
2	45
1 (Excellent)	23
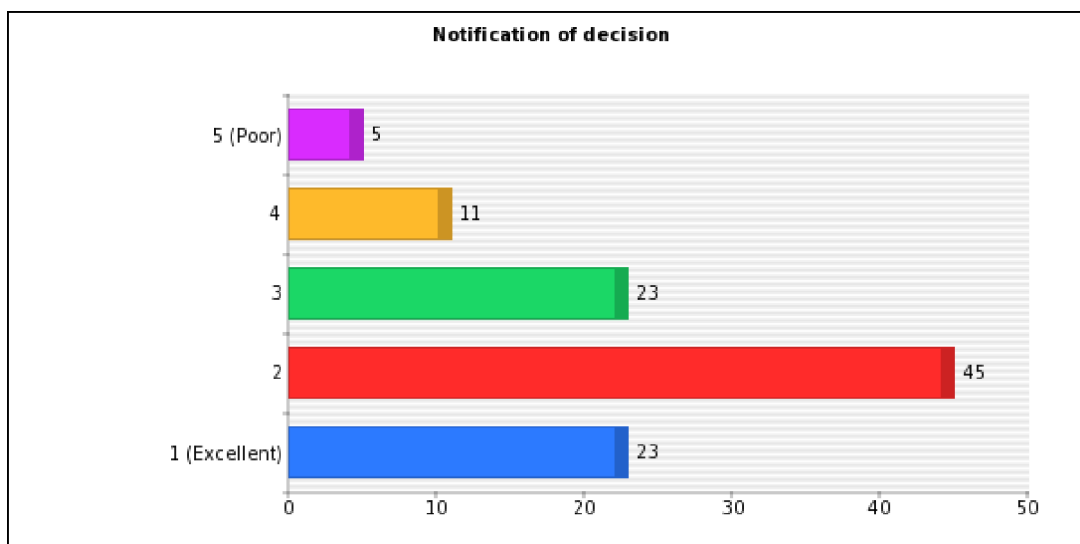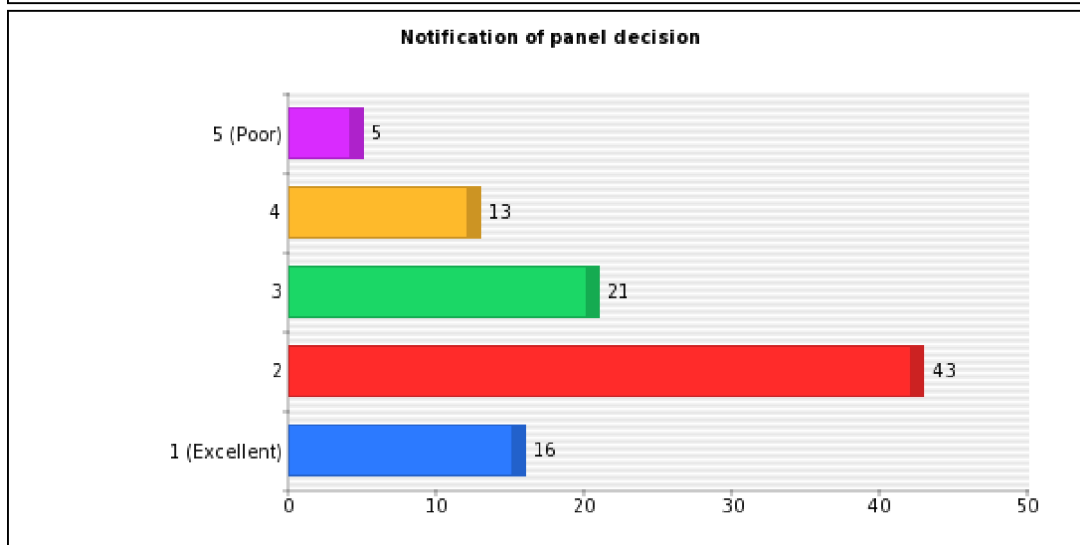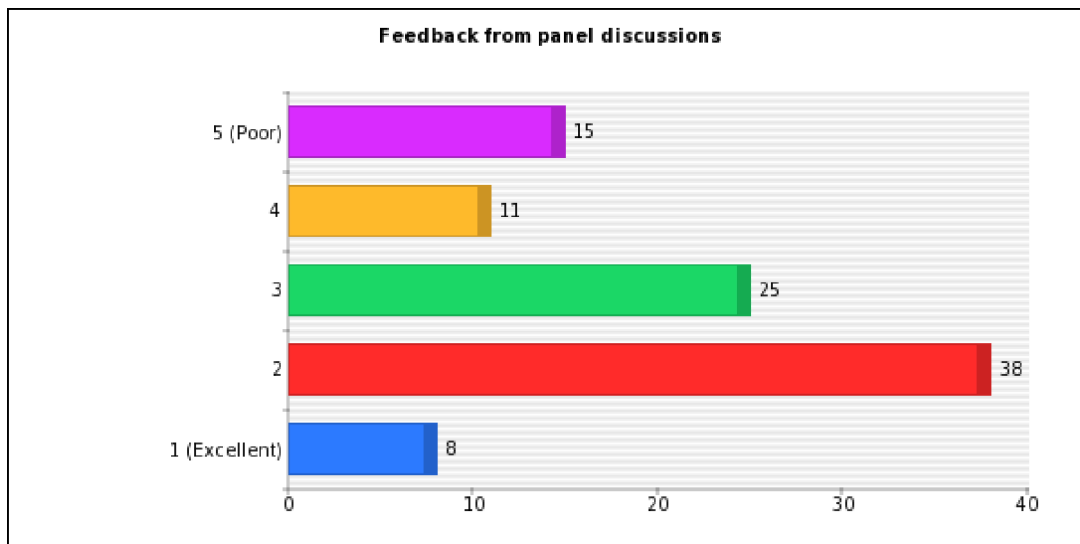
Though generally received well it was felt by some responders that the process within the moderating panel was not entirely transparent.
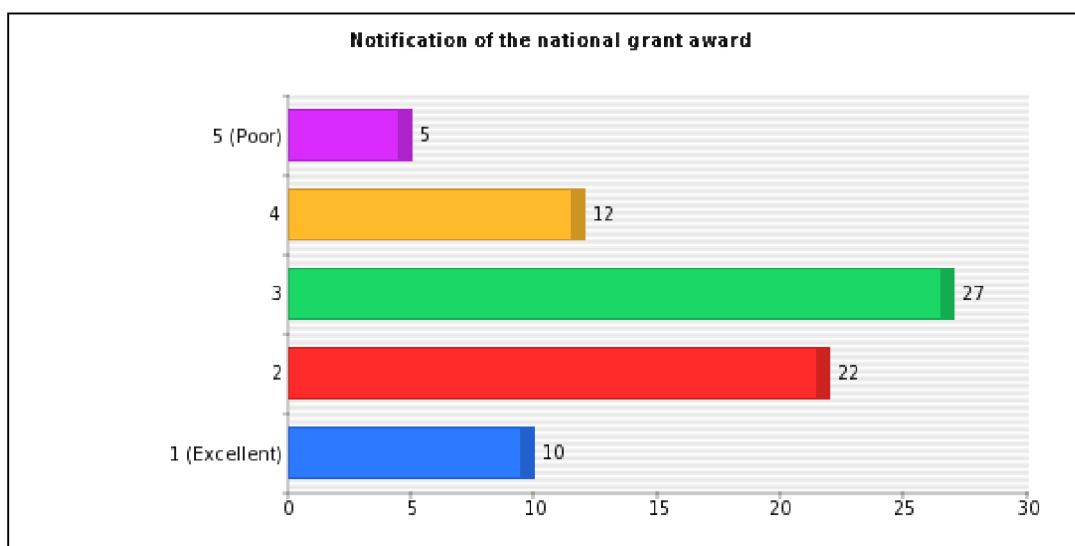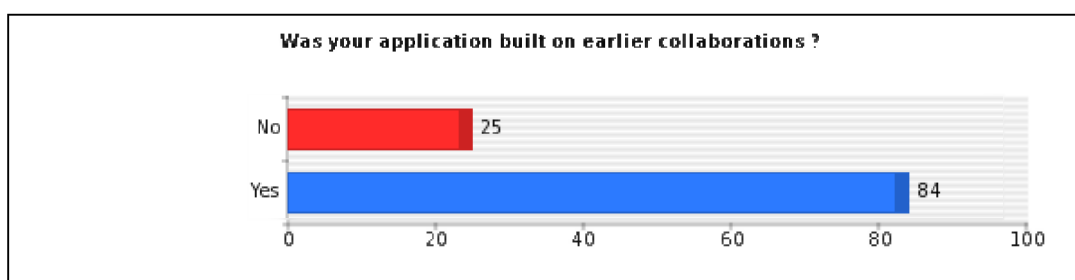
Notification of the national grant award

Rating	Value
5 (Poor)	5
4	12
3	27
2	22
1 (Excellent)	10

2.3.3. International collaboration

Was your application built on earlier collaborations ?

	Value
No	25
Yes	84

In case your application was granted, did your participation contribute also to international collaborative activities other than in the granted proposal are addressed?
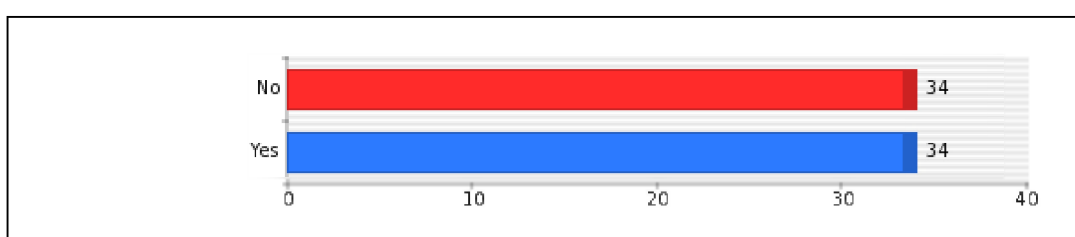
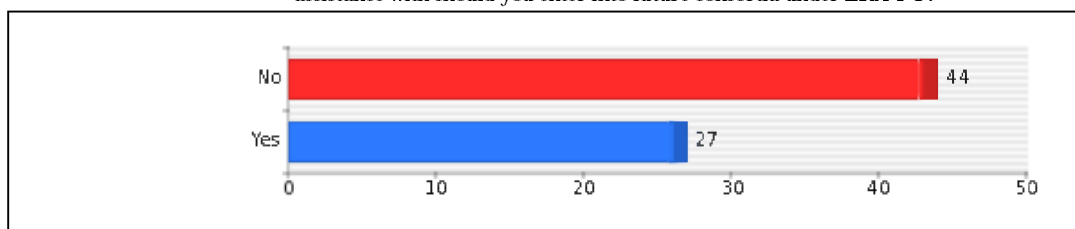|	Value
No	34
Yes	34

In case your application was not granted, did your participation contribute to international collaborative activities?

	Value
No	30
Yes	24

Through this transnational call for proposals more than 20% of the responders initiated new collaborations.

24
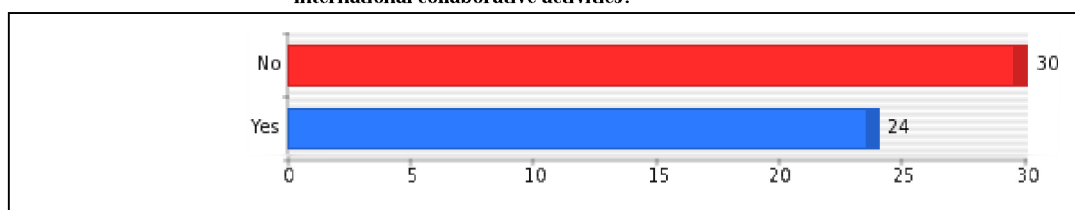
Were there aspects of this stage of the process that you would appreciate further assistance with should you enter into future consortia under ERA-PG?

The responders who requested further assistance brought up the following issues they encountered after their projects had been selected for funding:

- In some countries there was an additional evaluation procedure that delayed the start of the project.
- In some cases the grants of some of the members of a consortium were reduced by the funding agencies after the project was selected. This was felt as a drawback for carrying out the work plan.
- Final decision making processes of the different funding partners should be better synchronised
- Assistance with negotiation of the Consortium Agreement would be welcomed by some responders.

2.4 General conclusions and recommendations

Overall the Call and its evaluation and selection procedures were received well. Consortia from both funded and non funded projects benefited from the joint applications in terms of generating new international partnerships.

The response to the questionnaire in terms of number of responders was moderate. This may be due to the fact that the questionnaire was sent approximately seven months after the last national funding decisions were made. In future, it would be presferable to send the questionnaire closer to the end of the completion of the procedure.

Other points for improvement are:
- In some cases better synchronisation between the final national decision making procedures is desired
- A broader range of countries/ organisations participating in the Call would prevent artificial barriers for transnational cooperation and enhance the opportunities for collaborative research projects.

Appendix 1. Participating funding organisations

Table of participating countries and organisations in First Call for Proposals (as included in the Call Notice, February 2006). The actually awarded budgets have been increased by some partners in order to enable funding of a few additional projects in the final selection step. The exact figures are presented in ERA-PG Research Programme Report 2006.

Country	Organisation	Total allocated budget maximum up to [Euro]	Sub Call A	Sub Call B
Belgium (BE):	Ministry of Flanders, Science and Innovation Division	0.3 M	0.3 M	
Denmark (DK):	Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation (DASTI)	2 M	2 M	
Finland (FI):	Academy of Finland (AKA)	1 M	1 M	
France (FR):	National Agency for Research (ANR)	2-3 M		2-3 M
Germany (DE):	Project Organisation Juelich (FZJ) on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)	6 M		6 M
Germany (DE):	German Research Foundation (DFG)	4 M	4 M	
Italy (IT):	Ministry of University and Research (MUR)	3 M	3 M	
The Netherlands (NL):	Netherlands Genomics Initiative / Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NGI/NWO)	2 M	2 M	
Norway (NO):	Research Council Norway (RCN)	0.375 M	0.375 M	
Portugal (PT):	Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT)	0.3 M	A not predefined part of 0.3 M	A not predefined part of 0.3 M
Spain (ES):	Ministry of Education and Research (MEC)	3 M		3 M
United Kingdom (UK):	Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)	7 M	A not predefined part of 7 M	A not predefined part of 7 M

Other ERA-PG partners are the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (BMBWK) in Austria, The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MOARD) in Israel, the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning (FORMAS) in Sweden, and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) in Switzerland. These organisations did not participate in the development and organisation of the First Call.

Appendix 2. Applicant questionnaire on ERA-PG

Funding organisations around and beyond Europe are currently planning a second call under the umbrella of the European Research Area in Plant Genomics. We are gathering feedback on the experiences of those involved in the First Call in order to help us to improve the process where appropriate. We have identified you as part of the applicant community and would value your contribution to this survey. To this end we have designed a brief questionnaire. Completion is in confidence and should not take more than 15 minutes. The deadline for completion is 30th November 2007 in order to allow timely contribution to the planning process.

Your Details

Name

Email

Introduction

1) Please identify your position in the applicant community to assist in analysis of the results of this survey.

☐ Consortium co-ordinator

☐ Principal investigator

☐ Co-applicant

☐ Institutional Grants Officer

☐ Awarded

☐ Rejected after second stage (full proposals)

☐ Rejected after first stage (pre-proposals)

Call pre-announcement

2) How did you find out about the ERA-PG Call?

☐ ERA-PG website

☐ ERA-PG National Call Coordinator

☐ National funding organisation website

☐ Personal communication (academic colleague or other)

3) Did you see the Call pre-announcement?

☐ Yes

☐ No

4) If you answered "Yes" to question 3

(a) Did you find this valuable as advance warning?

☐ Yes

☐ No

5) If you answered "Yes" to question 3

(b) Was the call pre-announcement clear and easy to understand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

6) If you answered "No" to question 3 then please comment briefly on how you think it could be improved (less than 100 words)

Call Notice

The Call Notice and administrative procedures were designed during a consultative process in order to come to a procedure that was mutually acceptable, and conformed to the legal and strategic requirements of all parties. The outcome was preparation of a call with broad themes in order to allow maximum participation. Within the overarching themes there were two sub-calls; Sub Call A, more orientated towards basic science and Sub Call B focusing on public-private partnership.

7) Was the ERA-PG call notice clear and easy to understand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

8) If you answered "No" to the previous question then please comment briefly on how you think it could be improved.

9) Did you feel the ERA-PG call notice was sufficiently inclusive for the applicant community?

☐ Yes

☐ No

10) If you answered "No" to the previous question then please comment briefly on areas that were not represented.

[   ]

11) Would you prefer to see a more focused activity?

☐ Yes

☐ No

12) If you answered "Yes" to the previous question then please comment briefly on suggested areas of focus, taking into account where possible your knowledge of other national and international activities.

[   ]

Call Administration: Pre-proposals

The call was administered electronically by a joint secretariat in the Netherlands; Please give a score, on a scale of 1 (Excellent), 2 (Good), 3 (Satisfactory), 4 (Fair) to 5 (Poor), on your opinion of the different stages of the process, taking into account clarity, timeliness etc. Brief comments highlighting both positive and negative aspects of the procedure and points for improvement may be given at the end of this section.

13) Instructions to Applicants

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
          1 2 3 4 5

14) Pre-submission advice where required

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
          1 2 3 4 5

15) Notification on receipt of application

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
          1 2 3 4 5

16) Feedback from Programme Board discussions

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
          1 2 3 4 5

17) Notification of decision

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
          1 2 3 4 5

18) Further comments

> |

Call Administration: Full proposals (applicable for 2nd stage applicants only)

As in the "Call Administration: Pre-proposals" please give a score, on a scale of 1 (Excellent), 2 (Good), 3 (Satisfactory), 4 (Fair) to 5 (Poor), on your opinion of the different stages of the process, taking into account clarity, timeliness etc. Brief comments highlighting both positive and negative aspects of the procedure and points for improvement may be given at the end of this section.

19) Clarity and utility of instructions to Applicants

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
       1 2 3 4 5

20) Response of Call Secretariat and/or National Call Coordinators to requests for assistance

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
       1 2 3 4 5

21) Quality of referee comments

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
       1 2 3 4 5

22) Notification of panel decision

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
       1 2 3 4 5

23) Feedback from panel discussions

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
       1 2 3 4 5

Call Administration: Referees responses

Applicants were given the opportunity to see and respond to the comments received from the peer reviewers before the Programme Board meeting. This is not a common procedure in all countries so it would be useful to have feedback on whether this was a valuable additional step that should be included in further calls.

24) Did you find the opportunity to see and respond to reviewers comments useful?

☐ Yes

☐ No

25) Would you welcome this opportunity again in future transnational calls?

☐ Yes

☐ No

National Procedures (applicable for ERA-PG grant holders only)

Simplification and transparency were core ambitions of the development of this call and for this reason there was a common joint evaluation process. However, there was a degree of inherent complexity due to variable funding geometry and the need for different national procedures after evaluation and before final release of funds. This process ran smoothly inasmuch as no selected consortia failed on the basis that insufficient funds were available for all partners. However, there were some delays to the start of projects as a result.

26) Notification of the national grant award

Excellent ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Poor
         1 2 3 4 5

27) Did you experience unacceptable problems or delays in the start of your joint project?

☐ Yes

☐ No

28) Were there aspects of this stage of the process that you would appreciate further assistance with should you enter into future consortia under ERA-PG?

☐ Yes

☐ No

29) If you answered "Yes" to the previous question then please comment briefly below.

Effect on international collaboration

The funding organisations in ERA-PG aim to stimulate transnational collaboration. We would like to know if applications built upon earlier collaborations and if there are other effects (exchange, other collaborations, etc) of the call besides the joint research in the selected projects.

30) Was your application built on earlier collaborations ?

☐ Yes

☐ No

31) Please comment briefly on your previous answer below.

32) In case your application was granted, did your participation contribute also to international collaborative activities other than in the granted project?

☐ Yes

☐ No

33) Please comment on your previous answer

[   ]

34) In case your application was not granted, did your participation to an application contribute to international collaborative activities?

☐ Yes

☐ No

35) Please comment on your previous answer

[   ]

36) Please identify your position in the applicant community to assist in analysis of the results of this survey.

☐ Consortium co-ordinator

☐ Principal investigator

☐ Co-applicant

☐ Institutional Grants Officer

General remarks

37) Do you have any other remarks that could be of help to improve the process for the second call?

[   ]

38) Name, address, e-mail (voluntary)

[   ]

Submit Questionnaire