

ASSEMBLE



ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN MARINE BIOLOGICAL LABORATORIES EXPANDED

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Abstract

The deliverable describes the management of the trans-national access (TA). In addition, it flags issues faced by the different stakeholders of the TA: applicants, access officer, TA liaison officers, USP members and users. This document provides recommendations to improve and facilitate the TA management among the partners to correct issues detected by the AO during the first year.



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1. Introduction

Most of the partners (32, in 16 countries) in the ASSEMBLE Plus Consortium provide an external community of Users from academia and the private sector with Transnational Access to a high diversity of marine environments, to research laboratories, and to their various research services. In addition, they provide hosting and catering so that the users can focus on achieving their research objectives during their Access period.

A key task of this project is to coordinate, harmonise and guarantee the quality of the transnational access provided across the partnership. For this reason, WP3 (NA1) has provided a TA policy document including procedures that formed the foundation of all the functionalities and information provided by the web-based TA system. In addition, an on-line proposal submission system (WP3; NA1) has been designed and built to enable Applicants to get informed about the possibilities of TA and to be able to interactively submit research proposals. Following submission deadlines these proposals are then proceeding through the evaluation and selection procedures.

2. Objectives

The first Call for Access Proposals has taken place and we are well on our way through the first TA period in ASSEMBLE Plus. So now is the time to evaluate critically the various policies and procedures and adjust them to exigencies of Access Providers, accommodate the Users regarding their needs, of course all within the restrictions and rules set by current TA regulations of the EU. The information provided on the ASSEMBLE Plus website needs to be evaluated; is it perfectly fine tailored to User needs? Is the on-line TA proposal submission system functioning as desired?

The report here critically examines these aspects, taking into account feedback from Applicants, Users, Access Providers, and User Selection Panel members. The result of this internal evaluation is a series of recommendations for further improvement of TA procedures as well as further improvements of the on-line TA application submission system.

This deliverable intends to contribute to the following objectives: i) enhancing TA to state-of-the-art European infrastructures for marine biology and ecology; and ii) improving service provision by these infrastructures in line with their areas of excellence in marine biology and ecology, with emphasis on developing novel key enabling technologies and data solutions

3. TA management

3.1 Workflow of the TA

Transnational Access (TA) Providers in the ASSEMBLE Plus consortium need to agree on common, straightforward and transparent procedures to ensure harmonised TA provision and User satisfaction. Therefore, WP3 has produced a policy document for regulating, granting and supporting TA (D3.1). The TA policy document describes the workflow of TA delivery. Associated to it are templates and forms for the establishment of proposals, user access contracts, a data management plan, and post-access forms. In summary, there will be a continuously open Call for TA applications, allowing



applicants to submit their applications at any time. Yet, there are two submission deadlines and selections per year. To avoid conflict of interest, these selections are performed in part by members of the (external) Advisory Board.

The documentation has been based on earlier experience with TA in ASSEMBLE and EMBRIC and on recommendations of pp2-EMBRC. It has been refined with input from the TA liaison officers at the partners in ASSEMBLE Plus, and has incorporated EU-rules and regulations of TA.

3.2 Community of TA liaison officers

3.2.1 Creation of the community

The Access Officer (AO) established a network of liaison officers (LOs) from each partner involved in the TA activities (Access Provider; see Grant Agreement and D3.1). A list of these LOs, with their contact details, was added to the website to allow applicant to directly contact the relevant ones in order to get first-hand information about service availability and to fine-tune their TA applications. Such interactions are aimed at enhancing overall feasibility of the proposed project at the selected Access Provider and to help the Applicant in selecting the most appropriate Access Provider. LOs were made aware that disclosed project ideas must be treated confidentially, i.e., are not to be shared with third parties or otherwise expropriated.

3.2.2 Workshop of Naples

A WP3 workshop was organised on 7-8 February, 2018 at the SZN in Naples (WP3-leader). The AO presented the LOs with the application form to be filled out by the applicants, the post-access procedures, and the costs of TA. Discussions focused on issues at several Access Providers, which could all be solved, given that several partners have built up experience in previous TA programmes.

3.2.3 Tools created to communicate with the community

To engage with the LO's at the Access Providers, a "google doc account" was established and the AO designated different access levels and categories, depending on the document to share. The details of the account are: Name: ASSEMBLE Plus EMBRC, amt@embrc.eu

3.3 User Selection Panel

The Project Implementation Committee (PIC) selected a group of experts of marine biology and related fields to form an Advisory Board (AB) for which the terms of reference and non-disclosure agreement were prepared. Six of the AB members participated in the first user selection panel (USP). As for the 1st USP meeting, PIC meeting #1 took place on the 15th March 2018 at CCMAR, Faro, Portugal.



List of AB members:

AB member	Affiliation
Dr Zbynek Kozmic	Institute of Molecular Genetics of the ASCR
Prof. Jordi Garcia Fernandez	University of Barcelona
Prof. Georg Pohnert	Max-Planck-Institute for Chemical Ecology
Dr Suzanne Williams	Natural History Museum, London
Dr Niall McDonough	Marine Institute, Galway
Dr Mike Thorndyke	Former ASSEMBLE coordinator
Mr Markus Pasterk	BBMRI-ERIC
Dr Douglas McKenzie	Xanthella Ltd
Dr Helena Abreu	ALGApplus
Prof. Cristina Varese	University of Turin, MIRRI
Ms Ann Ruddy	Redrose Developments
Dr Euan Brown	Heriot Watt University, former EMBRC steering committee member

4. Results of the first call

4.1. TA system reviewing

4.1.1. Submission process

A list of services was available on the website from the end of December 2017 onwards, enabling applicants to submit their proposals for the first Call of TA until the end of January. Following the opening of the call, the AO interacted and responded to the applicants' questions and liaised with the LOs. Applicants encountered various issues while submitting their proposal to the 1st call. Therefore, the AO gathered feedback from applicants regarding these issues, and the collected feedback is now being used to improve the submission process. **A total of 65 applications were received.**

4.1.2. Eligibility check

Following the proposal submission deadline, an evaluation process described in the guidelines was implemented. First, the AO checked proposal eligibility according to criteria described in D3.1.



4.1.3. Feasibility check

The feasibility of the proposals was then checked by the LOs. Feasibility check implies that the LO checks the ability of the Access Provider to support the Applicant with the successful execution of the proposed project within the proposed time window. It does not imply any selection, or even prioritization, based on scientific quality or preference, as the scientific evaluation is the task of the USP. The LOs encountered several issues when doing the feasibility check, which were solved following feedback with the AO.

4.1.4. Scientific review

The AO distributed the proposals found to be eligible and feasible over the members of USP in such a way that each proposal was evaluated by at least one external USP member from the Advisory Board and one internal member from the PIC. Conflicts of interest were avoided, ensuring that USP members did not evaluate proposals requesting access to their home institute or proposals written by colleagues from their home institute.

Given the number of proposals to be evaluated, the USP members agreed to apply triage (rank 1, definitely selected; rank 2, maybe, if there is space; rank 3, not selected). Proposals obtaining Rank 2 were then evaluated according to the following criteria (see Appendix 3):

1. Scientific excellence and novelty of the proposal
2. Scientific feasibility/probability of delivery
3. Need of the proposal to be carried out at the chosen Access Provider
4. Priority to external Applicants

To facilitate the evaluation process, the AO provided a google doc sheet in which the USP listed their scores and provided brief comments as well as a google form to score the proposals ranked 2.

Scores revealed general agreement between pairs of evaluators. A USP video-conference took place on March 15th 2018 at M6 at which evaluation results were compared and proposals receiving divergent scores were discussed; consensus was reached in all cases. **A total of 48 of the 65 applications (ca. 70%) passed the USP (rank 1 or 2).**

USP members were satisfied with the scientific evaluation process. They recommended for the next time that the USP meets face to face and dedicates a full day to evaluate the proposals. Moreover, they recommended to evaluate all the proposals in a single google form with the above selection criteria and a series of compliance tick-boxes. The USP members also recommended not to provide personal feedback to applicants due to the number of applications. These recommendations will be implemented in future selection panels.

For those projects that passed the USP, the AO sent e-mails to the relevant LOs to check if the Access Provider had budgeted enough TA funds for the first TA call to accommodate all of the projects requesting access to their stations. All projects that passed the USP could be accommodated. The AO then sent a letter of acceptance to each applicant of granted project with the LO in copy. The AO sent an e-mail of rejection to each applicant whose project had not been granted.



4.2. Statistics of the applications to the first call

The home institutions of the applicants included one SME; all others were from research institutions.

Disciplines

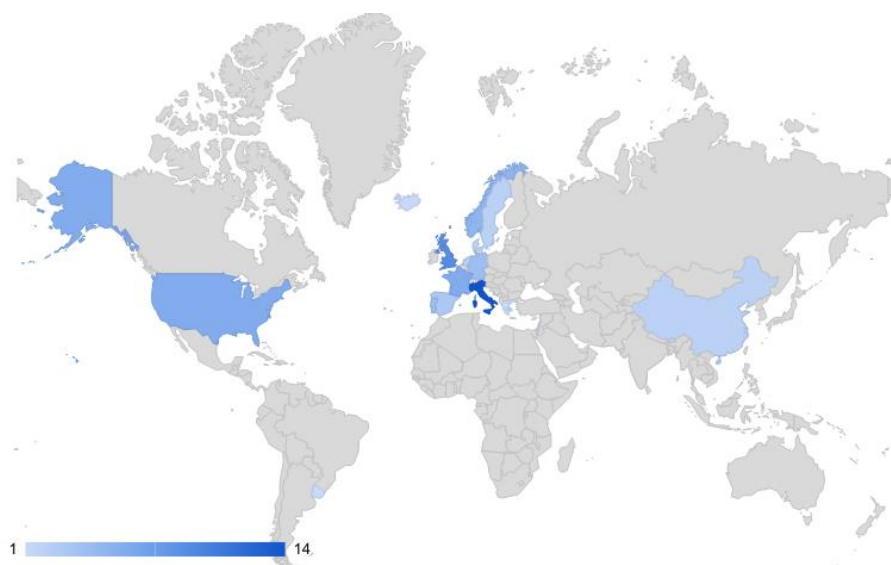
	Life sciences & Biotech	Earth & Environment	Chemistry
applicants	49	15	1
granted	37	10	1

Due to the large number of proposals in life sciences and biotechnologies, the application form is amended to include sub-categories of life sciences and biotechnologies.

Gender balance

	Male	Female
applicants	38	27
granted	26	22

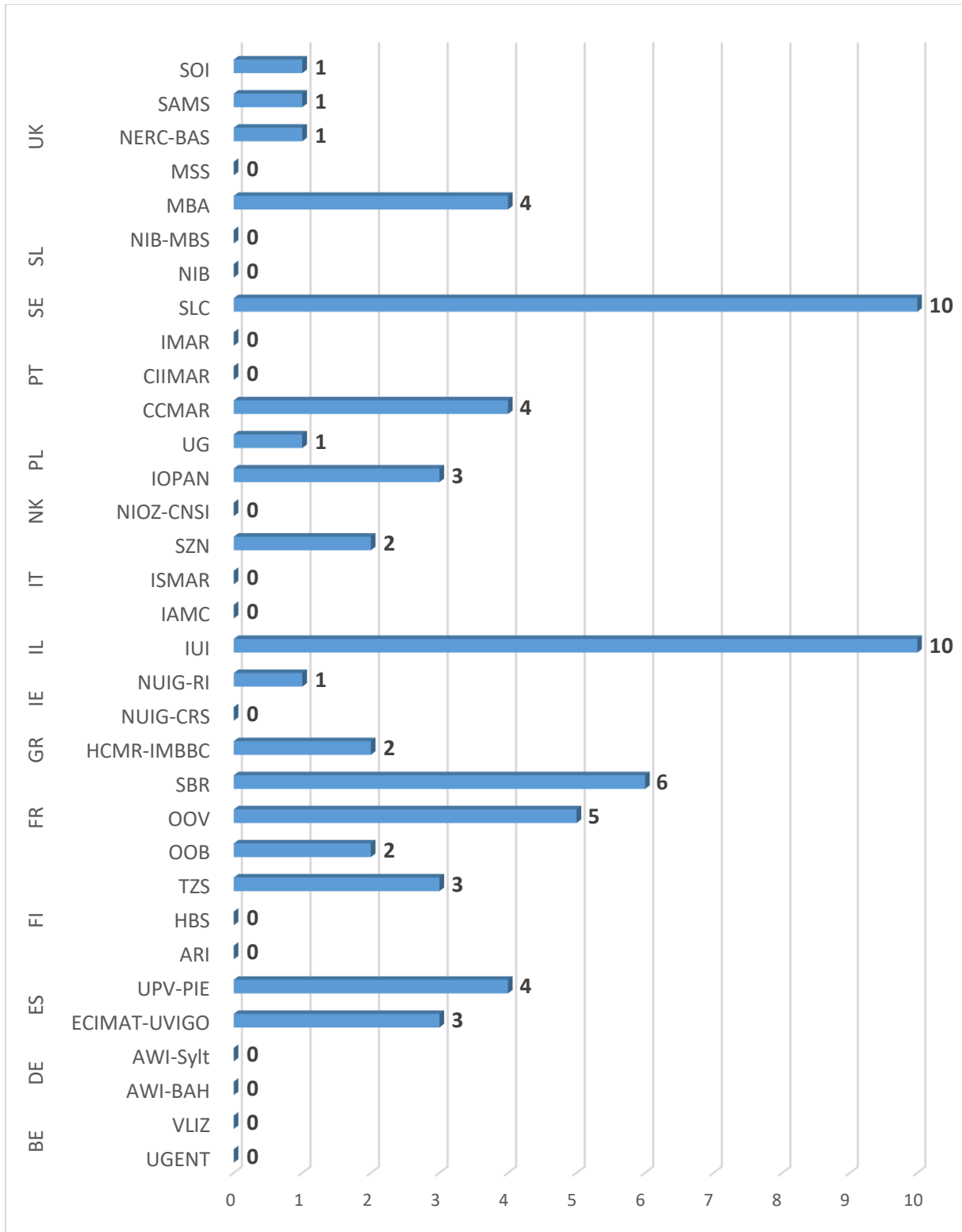
The majority of applications has been submitted by European researchers (86%), while the remaining ones came from non-EU countries (6 from USA, 3 from China, 1 from Uruguay).



Over 20% of the successful applicants were based at Italian research institutes, while 15% were based in the UK. The Italian partners in ASSEMBLE plus have been particularly active in spreading the news about the possibility for TA into the Italian research community via targeted messages to emailing lists managed by the various scientific networks and communities.

The most requested access providers in the 1st call were the Interuniversity Institute for Marine Sciences (IUI) in Israel and the Sven Lovén Centre (SLC) in Sweden, each receiving 10 applications.





Number of applications received by each access providers in the 1st TA call



4.3. Reporting the TA

The AO monitored and collected the documents required to reimburse the TA visit (confirmation of visit, activity report and user-group EU survey). After filling out the part dedicated to the TA management and access activities, the AO sent to the LOs the part B of the report due at M12 in June 2018.

A google sheet document was set-up for the LOs to report the access provision during this first call and the link (below) was sent to them in June 2018.

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ndLfHeJ2ntglb1RVZYgooRwmPVOoR9K31UuV6P_jGfM/edit?usp=sharing

5. Solving issues that became apparent during the first call

In order to improve the TA application system to guarantee maximum satisfaction of the Users, WP1, in collaboration with WP3 organised a workshop hosted by VLIZ, Oostende (Belgium) 12-13/07/18, in which many of the issues arising during the first call were addressed, solutions provided and actions defined to implement these solutions. The objectives of the meeting were:

- Decide on a common glossary for ASSEMBLE Plus TA; update the TA policy document and use terminology as in the glossary; these documents form the foundation for downstream applications such as the A+ TA website.
- Evaluate the current EMBRC-ASSEMBLE Plus web-based application system and make it user-friendlier, screen the research infrastructure categories and sub-categorisation in it and resolve any of the issues with it.
- Evaluate issues that have been flagged by Users, LOs and USP members during the first call and propose operational solutions, assess their feasibility.
- Set out a detailed plan to update the TA webpages, reorganise the TA web-based access system, and add updated documentation to the TA website

Glossary

A series of ontological issues were raised, words not having the same meaning across the Consortium. Some concepts can be expressed by different words, or words may have unclear definitions. Most terms and their definitions were fine. For a few problematic words, we chose single terms and defined them, focused on TA. These are to be used throughout the documentation. Result: a new glossary has been agreed upon.

TA policy

The guidelines for applicant and users, Access Providers, and the USP members was discussed and edited wherever required to resolve emergent issues during the first TA: Eligibility of PhD students. We decided they can apply. Master's and Bachelor's students are not eligible for TA. The EU now requires TA projects to incorporate a Data Management Plan in the procedures and instructions. This has been included in the Policy. The revised TA policy document is targeted to applicants, users, LOs and USP members. Terminology follows the glossary.



User Access Contract

This document template has been adapted where needed, conform the glossary and policy.

Application system

The current application system was presented, the various minor issues with it highlighted, and technical and practical operational improvements provided. The current application system has the following issues.

- Incorporation of the A+ access system into that of EMBRC has resulted in irrelevant categories for A+ in place within access system, EMBRC partners not in A+ TA can be selected in the system.
- An abrupt and unexplained jump out of A+ into an EMBRC application system.
- Too many levels of details, often irrelevant, in the service selection and not always clear what is meant exactly; risk of applicants drawn in the wrong search-path.
- Categorisation driven by university- instead of a marine station viewpoint of an access system and its functionalities. Yet, marine stations form the bulk of the partnership.
- Automatization of the back-end of the application system needs to be improved in order to avoid massive repetitive and error-prone manual work by the access- and LOs.
- No formal feedback system from the User or Applicant to the HQ is in place
- No built-in automatic reporting to EU.

Opting for the ARIA system of INSTRUCT-ERIC was considered, but then we needed to ask all A+ Access Providers to populate the system again from scratch (costs and hassle), it is not guaranteed for free (costs) and we will not own it. An alternative is the system in place for ASSEMBLE (€ 5000). Also here the system needs to be repopulated.

The attendants of the workshop concluded to adopt the web-based application system (EMBRC) and to accommodate it for A+ needs. Within A+ we expect hundreds of applications per call. Most applicants will opt for the funded A+ TA. At present we do not foresee large numbers of access proposals to EMBRC, but those that opt specifically for paid access via EMBRC, are to be redirected to a contact point at HQ for a personalised “Business-Class” treatment. The A+ website, tested and functional, can, with time, be taken in by EMBRC and be expanded with access options and functionalities relevant for EMBRC.

Research infrastructure categories in the access system

Following the choice of Country and Access Provider the applicant can choose among a series of research infrastructure categories, and within each of these a small series of subcategories. Illogical and out-of-place subcategories as well as categories and subcategories irrelevant for A+ are inactivated or removed and orphaned subcategories (if relevant and not already duplicated) go where they belong. All finer grained categories and other details are inactivated/removed. Service titles will be homogenized among partners by adapting them to the current Subcategory names. A description field will be added so the stations can specify (or not) what they offer under each specific service (i.e. all stations will have the same service names but with different descriptions in them). In the application system, text-boxes will be placed below each Service Title in which the applicant must describe synoptically and precisely the project’s specific requirements. This will enable the LOs to evaluate the applicant’s needs and help them with specifying these needs in the submitted proposal.



All the proposed modifications have obtained approval from the PIC.

6. Re-opening of access Calls

Due to some problems within the on-line application system, it has not been possible yet to operate a continuous call regime, as decided during the 1st PIC meeting. The 2nd call has been announced at the end of August 2018, with a deadline for submission set at the end of September (see table below). The AO has established timelines until the end of the project and informed the PIC, the AB and the community of LOs.

6.1. Timelines

6.1.1. Second Access Period

Action	Time period	Date	Involved parties
Advertisement	2M	End of June	AquaTT & Co
Test of System	2M	End of June	LO & AO
Re-opening of access	1D	27/08/2018	Applicant
Collection date	1D	28/09/2018	VLIZ
Eligibility	4D	01-05/10/2018	AO
Technical feasibility	2W	08-19/10/2018	LO
Transfer to USP	3D	22-24/10/2018	AO
Scientific review	1W	25/10-02/11/2018	USP
USP meeting	1D	06/11/2018	USP + AO
Costs checking	1W	08-15/11/2018	AO-LO

6.1.2. Third Access Period

Action	Time period	Date	Involved parties
Collection date	1D	01/02/2019	
Eligibility	4D	04-08/02/2019	AO
Technical feasibility	10D	11-22/02/2019	LO
Transfer to USP	3D	25-27/02/2019	AO



Scientific review	1W	01-08/03/2019	USP
USP meeting	1D	12/03/2019	USP + AO
Costs checking	1W	14-20/03/2019	AO-LO

6.1.3. Fourth Access Period

Action	Time period	Date	Involved parties
Collection date	1D	14/06/2019	VLIZ
Eligibility	2D	17-18/06/2019	AO
Technical feasibility	10D	19/06-03/07/2019	LO
Transfer to USP	3D	04-05/07/2019	AO
Scientific review	1W	08-15/07/2019	USP
USP meeting	1D	17/07/2019	USP + AO
Costs checking	1W	19-26/07/2019	AO-LO

6.1.4. Fifth Access Period

Action	Time period	Date	Involved parties
Collection date	1D	31/01/2020	VLIZ
Eligibility	2D	03-04/02/2020	AO
Technical feasibility	2W	05-18/02/2020	LO
Transfer to USP	3D	21-24/02/2020	AO
Scientific review	1W	25/02-06/03/2020	USP
USP meeting	1D	10/03/2020	USP + AO
Costs checking	1W	12-19/03/2020	AO-LO



6.1.5. Sixth Access Period

Action	Time period	Date	Involved parties
Collection date	1D	29/05/2020	VLIZ
Eligibility	3D	01-03/06/2020	AO
Technical feasibility	10D	04-16/06/2020	LO
Transfer to USP	2D	17-18/06/2020	AO
Scientific review	10D	19-29/06/2020	USP
USP meeting	1D	01/07/2020	USP + AO
Costs checking	1W	02-09/07/2020	AO-LO

6.1.6. Seventh and last Access Period

Action	Time period	Date	Involved parties
Collection date	1D	30/10/2020	VLIZ
Eligibility	2D	02-03/11/2020	AO
Technical feasibility	10D	04-17/11/2020	LO
Transfer to USP	2D	18-19/11/2020	AO
Scientific review	10D	20-30/11/2020	USP
USP meeting	1D	02/12/2020	USP + AO
Costs checking	1W	03-10/12/2020	AO-LO

7. Conclusions and outlook

Due to the short period of time between the kick-off meeting and the due date for the launch of the single access point at M3, the period for advertising this first call was short and announced just before end of December 2017. Therefore, a larger number of applicants is expected for the second call.

This first call faced several issues, which were gathered by the AO. The PIC requested from the AO a report on this matter. A working group was established to discuss best ways to improve the TA application system for the rest of the project. Most issues were dealt with; a few require discussion and decision from the PIC and subsequent approval from the ASSEMBLE Plus General Assembly at



Galway, Ireland, this Fall. These pertain to the types of users accepted and the way applicants of rejected applications are informed.

