

ASSEMBLE



ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN MARINE BIOLOGICAL LABORATORIES EXPANDED

Acronym: ASSEMBLE Plus

Title: Association of European Marine Biological Laboratories Expanded

Grant Agreement: 730984

Deliverable 2.7

2nd annual access report for the TA programme

September 2019

Lead parties for Deliverable: Sorbonne Université

Due date of deliverable: M24

Actual submission date: M24

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 730984. This output reflects the views only of the author(s), and the European Union cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

GENERAL DATA

Acronym: **ASSEMBLE Plus**

Contract N°: **730984**

Start Date: **1st October 2017**

Duration: **48 months**

Deliverable number	D2.7
Deliverable title	2nd annual Access Report for the TA programme
Submission due date	M24
Actual submission date	
WP number & title	WP2 - Management and Communication
WP Lead Beneficiary	Sorbonne Université
Participants (names & institutions)	Davide Di Cioccio, EMBRC-ERIC ; Clément Brousse, Sorbonne Université ; Nicolas Pade, EMBRC-ERIC

Dissemination Type

Report	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Websites, patent filling, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ethics	<input type="checkbox"/>
Open Research Data Pilot (ORDP)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Demonstrator	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

Dissemination Level

Public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)	<input type="checkbox"/>



Document properties

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Editor(s)	Clément Brousse, Sorbonne Université ; Nicolas Pade, EMBRC-ERIC
Version	1.0

Abstract

This deliverable describes the management of the trans-national access (TA) in its 2nd, 3rd and 4th call for access (October 2018 - September 2019). It provides updates on the transnational access workflow, with details about the selection of the applications, their review, and how results obtained by the TA users are shared. General statistics of the applicants and research services used during the four first rounds of TA are also provided.



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1. Introduction

Transnational Access in ASSEMBLE Plus is provided to a total of 36 marine stations in 15 countries. The stations provide access to a high diversity of marine environments; from the high Arctic (IOPAN) and Antarctic (NERC-BAS) to the tropics (IUI and NIOZ-CNSI) and the mid-Atlantic ridge (CCMAR and IMAR). Within mainland Europe, access is provided to the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Baltic seas. Habitats comprise estuaries (e.g. SZN, ISMAR, CCMAR, AWI, IOPAN, UG), mega-tidal seas (SBR), cold-water coral reefs (KMRS, NUIG, SAMS), brackish seas and sea ice communities (IOPAN, TSZ, ARI, HBS), near-shore deep sea (HCMR, IMEV, NUIG, UGOT, SAMS) and volcanic seeps (high CO₂ – low pH; HCMR, SZN, IMAR). The TA-providing stations (access providers) have modern research laboratories and a wide array of specialized research facilities to support internal and external users. Several of these also have technological backup of nearby university institutions.

Facilities include sampling and field access, biochemical and biological analysis, maintenance and culture of organisms, microscopy, molecular biology and bioinformatics. Biological resources encompass culture collections (OOB, SBR, MBA, SAMS, TZS) and bio-specimen banks (PiE-UPV/EHU). All stations host resident faculty and support personnel, engaging in cutting-edge science, e.g., on sea mammals (SOI, UG), sea turtles (SZN) and various finfish (HCMR, CCMAR, MSS).

Due to the diversity of access provided and the number of partners, a key issue of this project is to provide excellent coordination, harmonisation and quality management of access to ASSEMBLE Plus services and resources. Attention will be paid to optimising interoperability with cognate initiatives offering complementary access programmes. Best practices for service provision are disseminated throughout the consortium, notably via thematic workshops but also efficient internal communication.



2. Objective

This deliverable intends to contribute to the following objectives:

1. Enhance transnational access to a coordinated set of state-of-the-art European infrastructures for marine biology and ecology;
2. Improve 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. TA workflow

The overarching aim of the workflow of TA provision is to maximise acceptance of good project proposals. The workflow, which has been described in detail in Deliverable 3.1, illustrates the roles of all the stakeholders involved, and the documents required. This procedure has been based on earlier experience with TA in the projects ASSEMBLE Marine and EMBRIC, on recommendations of the pp2EMBRC project, and has been and continue to be refined with input from the Liaison Officers at the partners in ASSEMBLE Plus, considering also EU rules and regulations of TA. For each call:

1. The applicants submit TA proposals on-line. Applicants are encouraged to contact Liaison Officers (LO) of the Access Providers of their choice before submission to check proposal feasibility before submitting their Proposals;
2. The Access Officer (AO) checks the submitted TA proposals for eligibility;
3. The access system sends eligible proposals to the relevant LOs at the Access Providers chosen by the Applicants;
4. The LOs check the technical and financial feasibility of the proposals. They can contact the applicants for technical clarifications but cannot edit the submitted proposal. The LOs provide comments for the benefit of the User Selection Panel (USP) and the AO. The comments may include remarks on viability, use of resources, ethics issues, etc.
5. The USP performs a scientific review of the proposals and ranks them according to a set of predetermined criteria.
6. The AO informs the LOs which of the submitted proposals to their facilities have passed the USP review successfully;
7. The LOs assess which of these proposals can be accepted, given USP's ranking, and within their TA budget constraints. When done they report to the AO which of the proposals can be accepted and which ones cannot because of funding constraints;
8. The AO checks if proposal acceptance has been carried out following USP ranking and, if correct, sends:
 - a. for accepted proposals, a letter of provisional acceptance to the Applicant and LLOs. The applicant is requested to contact the LO to negotiate the contract for access and its conditions.
 - b. for proposals that passed the USP but for which insufficient funds are available, a letter to the applicant, informing him/her of that fact and proposing an alternative access provider;
 - c. for proposals that did not pass the USP, a rejection letter to the applicant, encouraging him/her to reapply in the next call.
9. An email is sent to successful applicants, informing them of the need to: establish contact with the access provider for the finalization of the contract for access, and a reminder about providing a data management plan for their project, as well as the need to publish results of their project (datasets, publications) as Open Access;
10. For accepted proposals, the LO and the applicant negotiate a User Access Contract. Their respective legal representatives are required to check this document. If agreed, all parties sign



the contract. The applicants are then defined as Users and the proposal is accepted as a project;

11. The TA project is carried out at the Access Provider;
12. When the TA visit is concluded:
 - a. The Access Provider provides a Confirmation of Access to be signed by the User and sent to the AO;
 - b. The User fills out the “User group questionnaire” and sends a pdf copy to the AO. This questionnaire is accessible online through the Download Area of the website <http://www.assembleplus.eu/access/download-area>
 - c. The User submits a “Activity report” and a “Data Management Plan” to the Access Provider and the AO.
 - d. The User send to the LO of the visited Access Provider receipts, tickets, etc. to be considered for reimbursement, according to procedures described in the User Access Contract;
13. Upon receipt of these documents, the AO notifies the LO that the Access Provider is to reimburse the User for incurred costs of travel, lodging and sustenance to a maximum amount as agreed upon in the User Access Contract.
14. The user archives metadata and any other datasets generated in the context of the TA as Open Access. The user commits her/himself to publish any scientific outcome resulting from its TA visit in Open Access journals or in the ASSEMBLE Plus Open Repository web platform.

3.2. TA policy document

Transnational Access (TA) Providers in the ASSEMBLE Plus consortium agreed on common and straightforward procedures to ensure harmonised TA provision and User satisfaction. WP3 has produced a detailed policy document for regulating, granting and supporting TA (see D3.1). The document includes guidelines to aid the USP members through their scientific evaluation and selection of the submitted proposals. To manage the TA smoothly, a series of templates and forms have been created for the establishment of proposals, contracts and other documents. The TA policy document is reviewed on rolling basis with the inputs of LOs. A new version of this document is released before the onset of any new TA call.

3.3. TA project proposals selection

Project proposal submission

The entry point for submitting application is the TA webpage of the ASSEMBLE Plus website <http://assembleplus.eu/access/transnational-access>. The AO interacted and responded to the applicants’ questions and liaised with the LOs. The EMBRC access system has been used for the 2nd and 3rd TA calls. From the 4th call, the ARIA web platform has replaced the EMBRC access system (see paragraph 3.6 below). Regardless the access system used, the TA webpage always provided all the information to submit correctly a project proposal.



Eligibility check

Following the proposal submission deadline, the AO checked proposal eligibility according to criteria described in D3.1. Only few applications did not meet the eligibility criteria.

Feasibility check

The feasibility of the proposals was checked by the LOs. During the feasibility check, 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.

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 Project Implementation Committee (PIC). Conflicts of interest were avoided, ensuring that USP members did not evaluate proposals to or from their own home institute.

The USP members agreed to apply the following selection criteria:

1. Scientific excellence and novelty of the project proposal (0-4)
2. Scientific feasibility/probability of delivery (0-2)
3. Need of the proposal to be carried out at the chosen Access Provider (0-2)
4. Priority to external applicants (overall, 2 points)
 - a. New users (i.e., no access received in previous TA calls)
 - b. No joint publication over last 5 years with in-house staff with which user requests collaboration
 - c. From non-marine disciplines
 - d. From countries where state-of-the-art marine research infrastructure is unavailable
 - e. External, not part of the ASSEMBLE Plus consortium

A range of scores are used for each selection criterion (in parenthesis, above). Maximum scores for all of the selection criteria sum up to 10. To fine-tune an evaluation, decimals can be given (e.g., 3.4, 1.7).

Each pair of evaluators is required to agree on an application's score and provide feedback that will be sent to the applicant. If they arrive at a similar score, the average of their scores is the final score. If their scores deviate by more than two points, another USP member (from the Advisory Board) provides a score, which is averaged with the nearest score given by the primary evaluators.

For call 2nd and 3rd the AO provided a Google spreadsheet in which the USP listed their scores and provided brief comments to facilitate the scientific review process. From the 4th call, the ARIA system was used instead. The webpage <http://www.assembleplus.eu/access/scientific-review> provides the list of the USP members and the selection criteria used for evaluating the project proposals.

Scores revealed general agreement between pairs of evaluators. USP videoconferences between pairs of evaluators are encouraged in case of disagreement in the evaluation process. Nonetheless, consensus was reached in all cases.

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 to accommodate all of the projects requesting access to their



stations. The AO then sent a letter of acceptance to each applicant of granted project with the TA officer in copy. The AO sent an e-mail of rejection to each applicant whose project had not been granted, inviting them to submit an updated proposal in the next call. In both cases, the USP feedbacks on the project proposal were attached.

3.4. Community of TA liaison officers

The network of liaison officers involved in the TA activities is established at each partner in the project involved in the TA. A list of these officers, with their contact details is constantly updated on the TA webpage to allow applicants to contact directly the relevant LOs in order to get first-hand information about service availability in order to fine-tune their TA proposals.

3.5. Workshop of Naples

A second, follow-up workshop dedicated to the harmonization of access procedure was organised on 7-8 May, 2019 at the SZN in Naples (WP3 leader). The AO presented to the LOs updates regarding the application form to submit project proposals, post-access procedures, and TA unit cost reporting. During this workshop it has been decided to update the TA workflow with the following measures: add in the application form a statement of affiliation of the user to a home institution during the TA visit, the need of the main applicant to be the project leader during the TA visit, need of archiving data and publications obtained in the TA by the user, for compliance with the Open Access Pilot programme to which ASSEMBLE Plus is participating.

3.6. Management tools for the access community

To engage with the LOs at the different steps of the TA workflow, a “Google spreadsheet” was established by the AO. This spreadsheet is constantly updated to report all the necessary information for the good implementation of the TA workflow during each call.

Following up the WP3 workshop “Improving the access for next TA calls in ASSEMBLE Plus” hosted at the WP3 partner VLIZ in Oostende in July 2018 and a decision from the PIC, the EMBRC access system has been replaced by the access system “ARIA”. This resolution came after a thorough benefits / costs analysis run by the management team and WP3, considering also indications presented already in the Deliverable 2.6, Appendix 1.

The ARIA system is developed by the European Research Infrastructure INSTRUCT-ERIC and it is used in other TA initiatives as well. ARIA provides a more user-friendly environment for the applicants to draft and submit their project proposal. Furthermore, ARIA is an effective tool for the AO and the LOs for the management of the applications, for the scientific review from the User Selection Panel and for reporting the access delivered. ARIA has been used since the onset of the 4th TA call, in May 2019. No major issues with this system have been reported so far.

3.7. TA reporting

3.7.1. Users reporting

The AO monitors and collects the documents required to reimburse the TA visit (confirmation of access, activity report + data management plan and user group questionnaire of the EC).



3.7.2. Access reported

TA projects are constantly running at the access providers and are reported right after the access has taken place. A google spreadsheet is currently used to report the access provision, from the information provided in the “confirmation of access” document sent by the LOs to the AO. Users information and amount of unit of access delivered during the first part of the project (M18) have been submitted to the EC portal during the first periodic report. This table is updated every month with the newest information about users and unit of access delivered. Currently, an overall amount of 87 out of 275 accepted access requests have been completed and reported so far.

3.8. *TA calendar: on-site and remote access requests*

During the 2nd and 3rd calls, applications could be submitted in defined periods of one month. Since the implementation of the new access system (4th call, May 2019) the access has been open on continuous basis (i.e. applications can be sent all-year round). On-site projects are evaluated at pre-defined collection dates: the next call for access (5th) will close on October 11, 2019 and the last call (7th) is set for June 2020. The full TA calendar is available at <http://www.assembleplus.eu/access/next-calls>.

Each TA call has a defined "access call window" consisting of a period of six months in which the TA project, once accepted, must be performed. Projects requiring exclusively remote access are reviewed and evaluated straightaway with no “access call window”.



4. Statistics

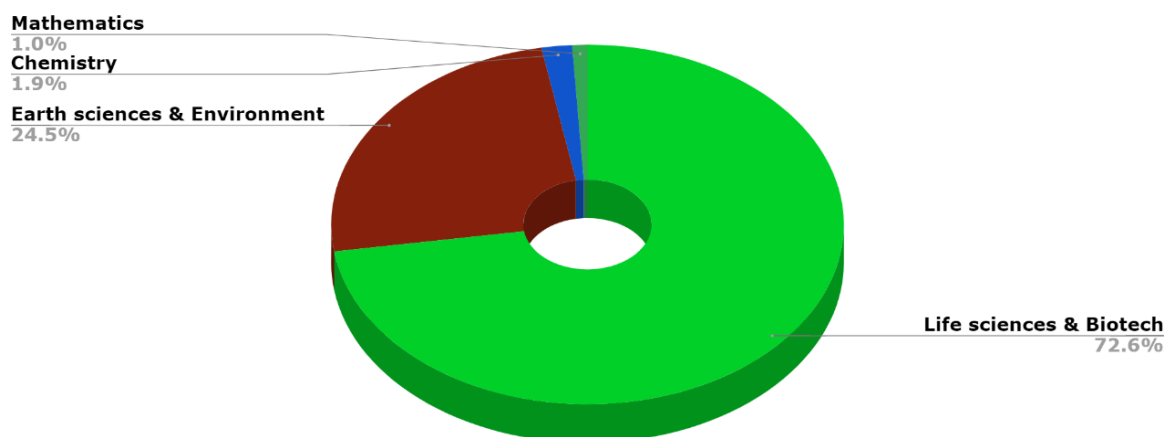
While this deliverable refers to the period from October 2018 to September 2019, the statistics of the access of the 1st call, launched in January 2018 are reported as well. This gives a more wide understanding of the key outcomes of the TA programme, at the half of the execution of the project.

Project proposals and their success rate

A total of 275 applications were received during the firsts four rounds of the TA programme, with some differences among the calls. A total of 180 applications were granted access so far. Overall, the acceptance rate of the proposals is 83.7%.

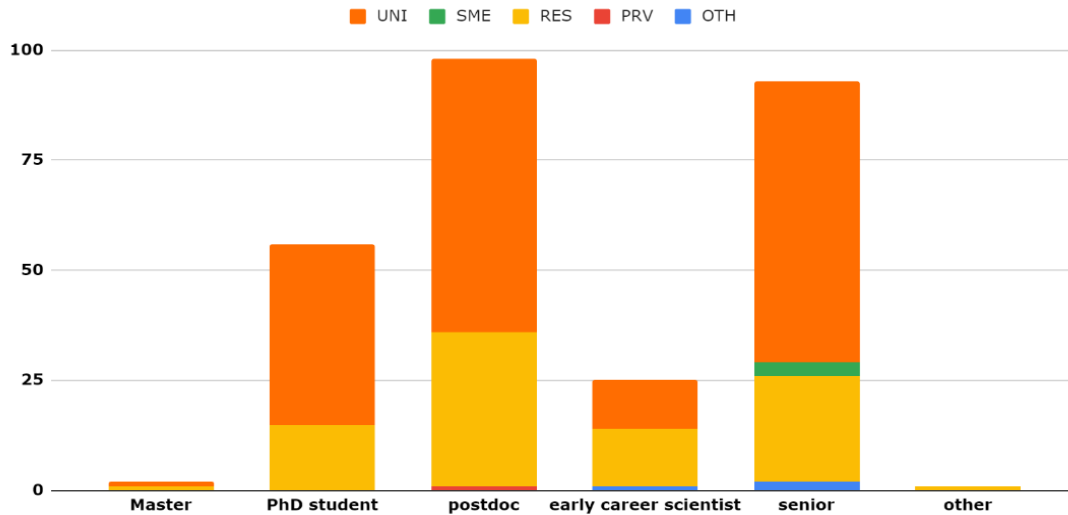
Applicants – general information

The majority of applicants comes from disciplines of the Life Sciences and Biotech (72.6%) and Earth Sciences and Environment (24.5%) fields; few applications come from applicants from Chemistry and Mathematics (2.9%) fields (pie chart below). The large majority of applicants defined themselves as marine biologists (66.2%). The gender of the project leaders is equally represented (50.3% males and 49.7% females).



Applicants – home institutions and their professional career status

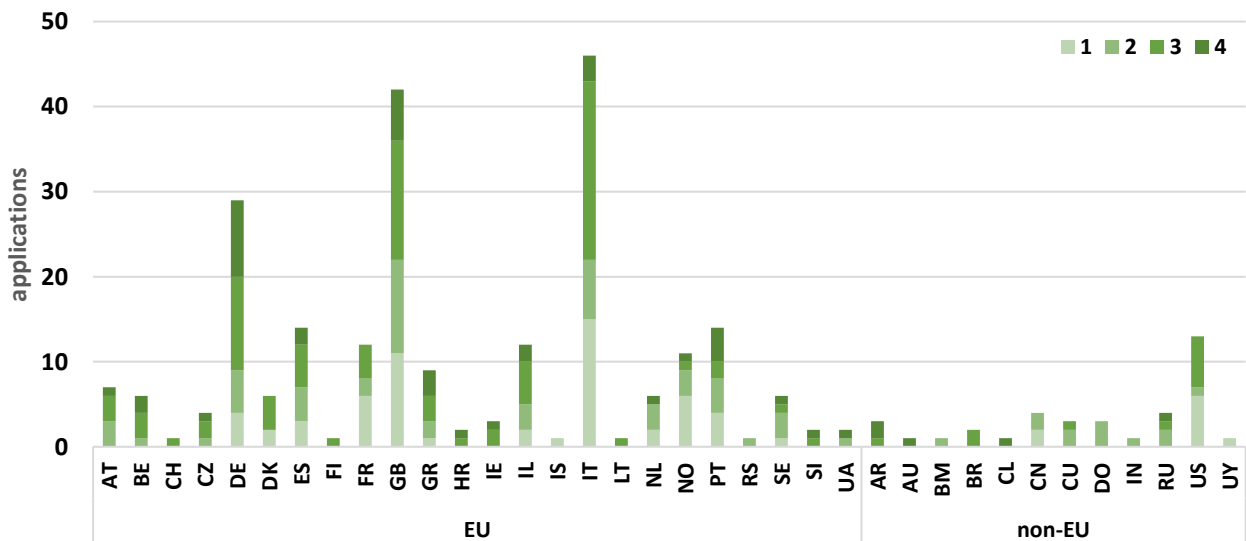
The vast majority of applications come from applicant whose home institutions are Universities and Research Organizations (203). Only few applications come from Small and Medium Enterprises and Private sector (2). Postdoc and senior researchers represent the majority of applicants (191) with a relevant amount of PhD students as well (56).



UNI=University, RES=Public Research organisation, SME=Small and Medium Enterprises, PRV= Private companies, OTH= Other organisation.

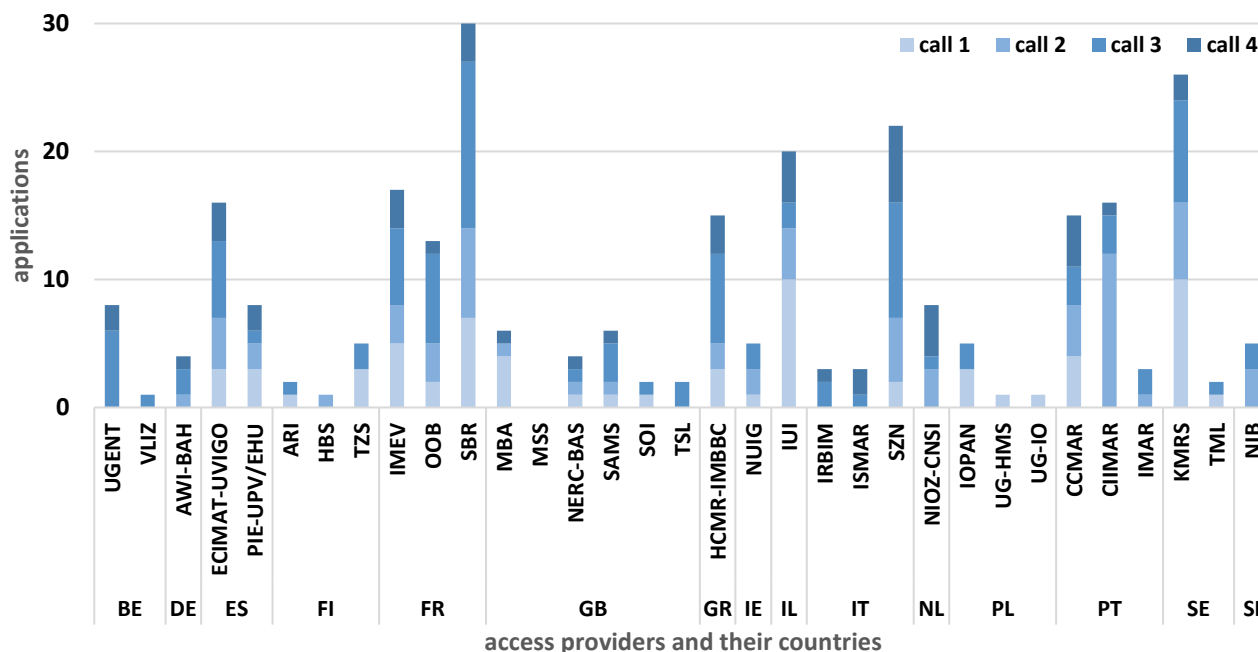
Applicants – home institutes countries

Applicants come in large majority from European institutes (86.6%), mostly from Italy, United Kingdom and Germany. Non-European applicants represent 13.4% of the applications received, still below the 20% quota of access reserved in H2020 projects. Applicants from non-EU institutions come mostly from United States.



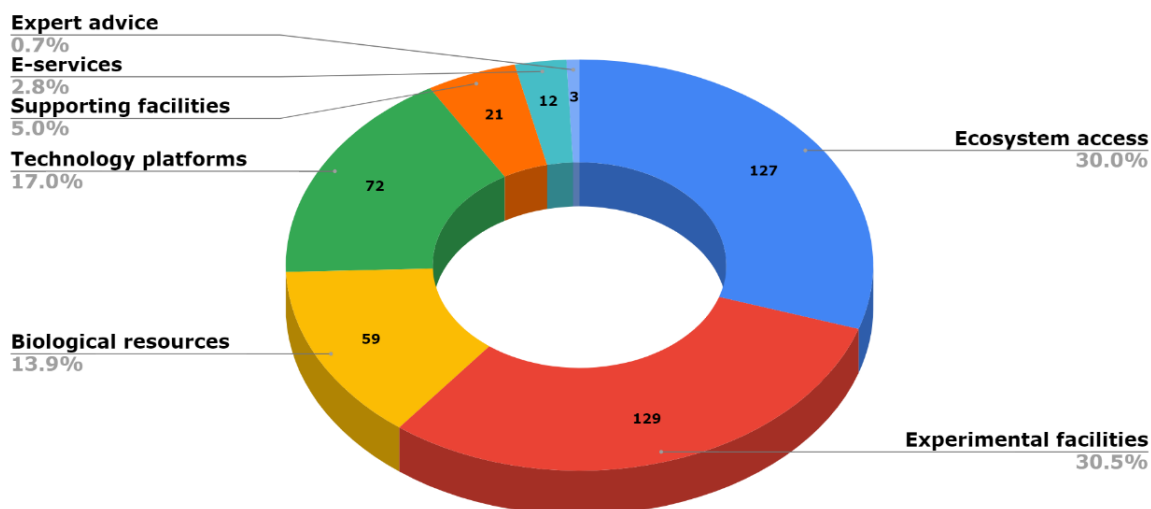
Applicants – access providers selected

During the firsts four TA calls, the most popular access providers were SBR (Roscoff, France), KMRS (Kristineberg, Sweden), SZN (Naples, Italy) and IUI (Eilat, Israel) each receiving 20 or more applications. A good number of applications were received at access providers from Spain and Portugal as well.



Applicants – research services required

The top three research services per application most in demand were experimental facilities (wet labs, aquaria, mesocosms; 30.5%), ecosystem access (research vessels and SCUBA diving; 30.0%), and technology platforms (bioassays, imaging, molecular biology and omics; 17%) followed closely by biological resources (marine model organisms, culture collections; 13.9%). Less requests were received for supporting facilities, e-services and expert advice (overall, 8.5%).

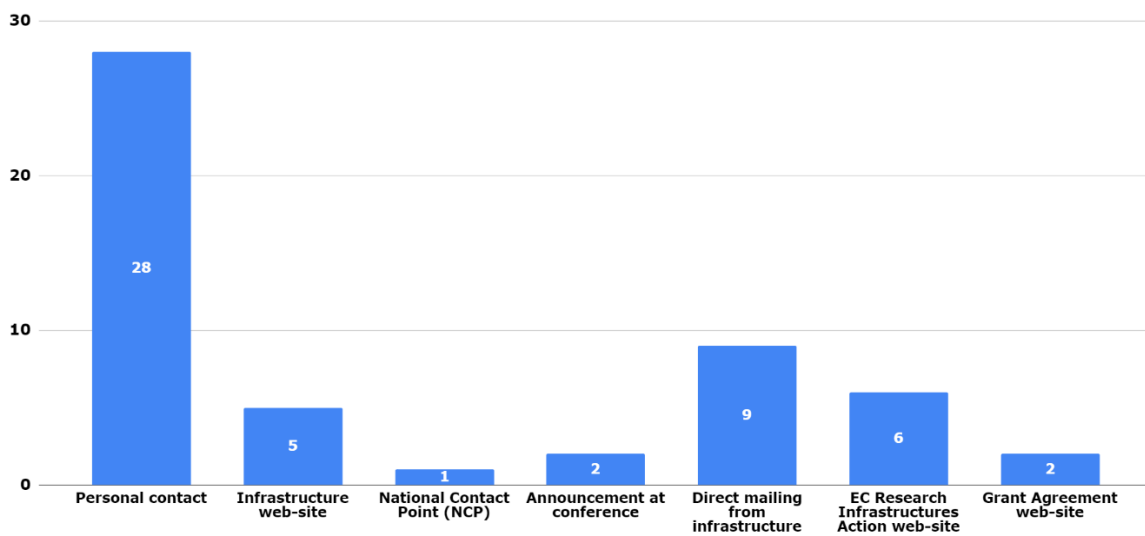


User satisfaction

At the conclusion of the TA visit, project leaders were asked to submit an online survey to evaluate their satisfaction in terms of scientific, technical, logistic, administrative and financial support offered by ASSEMBLE Plus for their research. Among the projects completed so far, 54 surveys have been collected. Their outcomes are shown below.

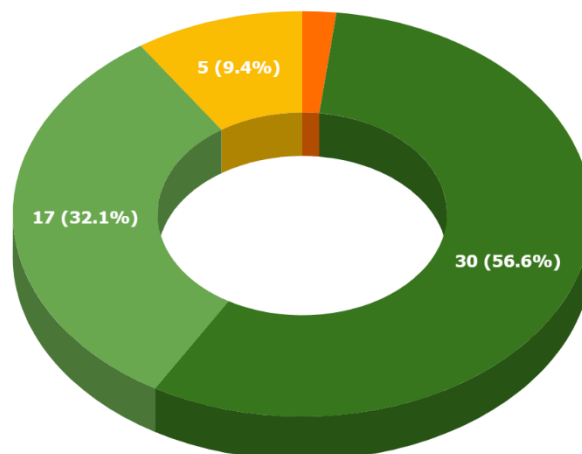
Advertising

Transnational access outreach was mostly made via personal contacts (28 users). The remaining part has been reached through different websites (14, overall), emails (9) and conferences (2).



Advice to use the most appropriate installation or infrastructure

Users were generally happy about the suggestions and indications received by liaison officers and the local researchers for design experiments with the most appropriate research services available during the access (52 users). Only one user indicated the advices received as “poor”.

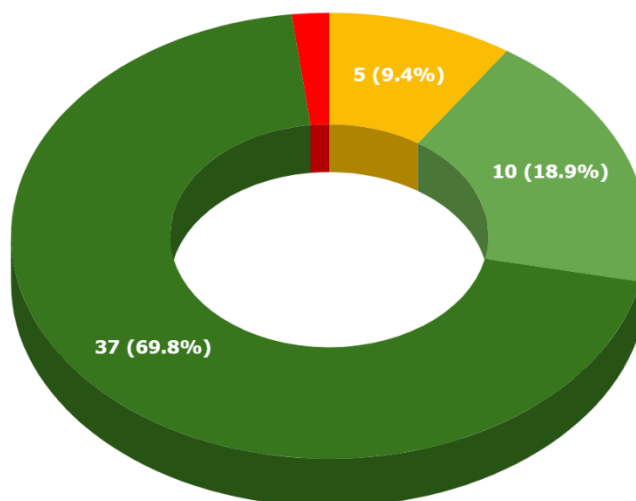


● 1. Very poor ● 2. Poor ● 3. Fair ● 4. Good ● 5. Very good



Technical support provided

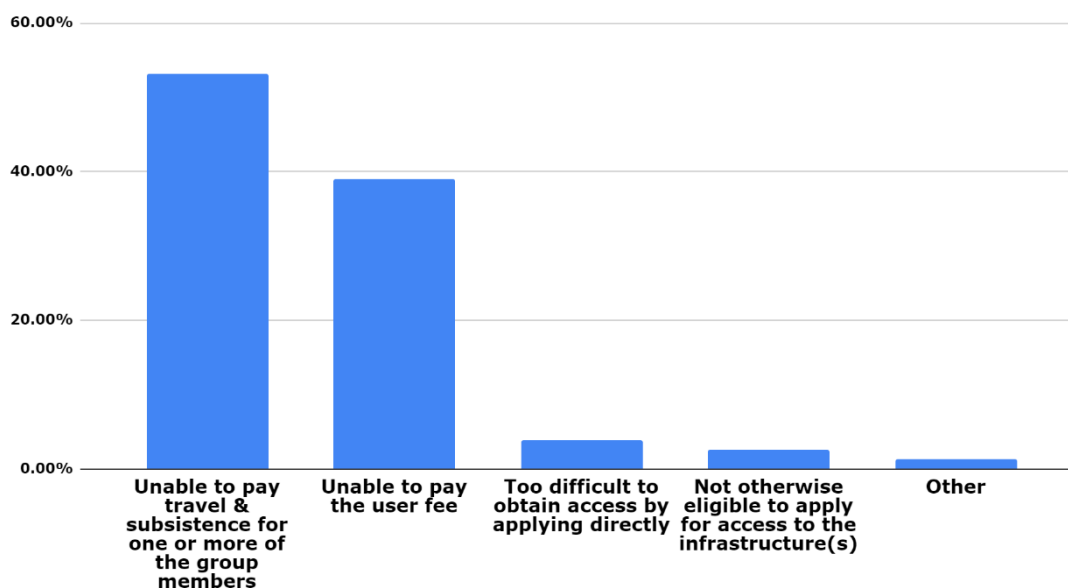
The vast majority of the users were very satisfied with the technical support received during the access, in terms of setup of experiments and results interpretation (very good, 69.8%; good 18.9%, fair 9.4%). Only one user reported the support received as “very poor”.



● 1. Very poor ● 2. Poor ● 3. Fair ● 4. Good ● 5. Very good

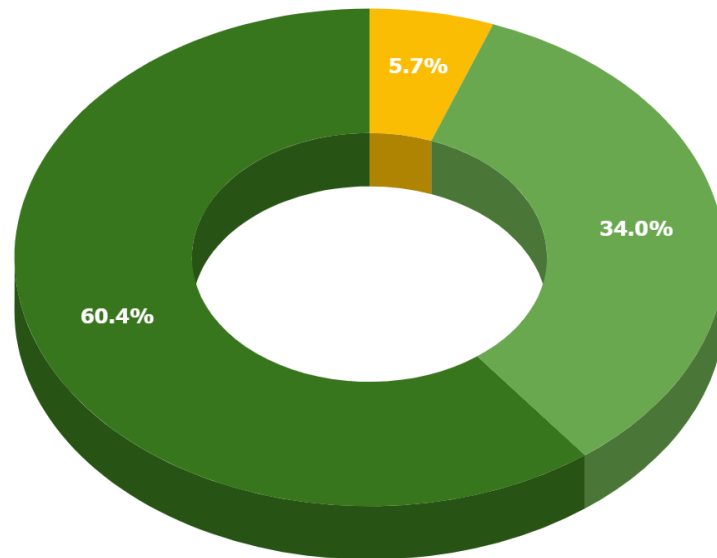
Need of ASSEMBLE Plus funding

Only the 11% of researchers stated that they could have run their research project without the ASSEMBLE Plus funding. The great majority of all the other users made use of the TA funding either for getting free access of facilities (53.6%) and for covering travel and subsistence expenses to their user group (35.7%). A small part indicated other reasons (7.8%) such as too difficult or not being eligible to apply to access to infrastructures.



Overall satisfaction

Overall, there is general agreement among the users about the benefit and the positive outcomes resulting from the TA programme of ASSEMBLE Plus: the vast majority of users indicated their access experience as very good (60.4%), good (34%), and fair (5.7%).



● 1. Very poor ● 2. Poor ● 3. Fair ● 4. Good ● 5. Very good



5. Conclusions

The TA programme of ASSEMBLE Plus is getting interest of the marine biological community and it is widening its reach in Europe and abroad, attracting users from different scientific areas. The implementation of the ARIA system for the project proposal management has run smoothly within the liaison officer community, giving a more user-friendly environment to the applicants as well. The onset of a continuous call regime and more emphasis on the advertising of the TA programme can attract a larger number of applicants in the following three TA calls. The update of the TA policy document through the last three calls and the consequent review of the related access procedures is necessary to allow the users to comply with the Open Access pilot programme and for offering them a smooth experience of the TA programme.

The overall positive feedback of the users regarding the support received, in terms of technical advices and funding offered, demonstrates the high quality of the access provided among the institutes participating in ASSEMBLE Plus Transnational Access programme and the need of top-class services for fostering research projects in the marine domain.

ASSEMBLE Plus is still not achieving the visibility that it strives for, particularly outside of the traditional marine research communities, where the TA programme opportunities are currently spread mostly via professional networks and personal contacts. Efforts will be made to obtain larger numbers of applicants, particularly from disciplines currently not using the programme extensively. In addition, further effort will be invested to increase the number of applications to the access providers who have received few applications. Finally, ASSEMBLE Plus will attempt to also increase the application rate from outside of the EU. Current application level is 13% non-EU applicants. Efforts will be made to bring this closer to the maximum 20%, particularly by increasing dissemination amongst southern Mediterranean countries.

