AQUARIUS
Guidelines for Transnational Access (TA) Applications

Guidelines for Applicants

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About this document

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

On the first of March 2024 the Horizon Europe project AQUARIUS "Aqua Research Infrastructure Services for the health and protection of our unique, oceans, seas and freshwater ecosystems" was launched.

AQUARIUS brings together diverse research infrastructures to address the long-term sustainability of marine and freshwater ecosystems. For the first time, a broad suite of 57 research infrastructure services - including research vessels, mobile marine observation platforms, aircraft, drones, satellite, sensors, fixed freshwater and marine observatories and test sites, experimental facilities, and sophisticated data infrastructures - will be integrated to support researchers and stakeholders in tackling pressing environmental challenges.

Through Transnational Access (TA) funding calls, the project will facilitate access to these research infrastructures, fostering large-scale, multidisciplinary projects aimed at generating impactful results. The focus will be on research that informs evidence-based marine and freshwater policies, with the ultimate goal of protecting ecosystems, reducing pollution, and promoting a sustainable blue economy.

The TA calls will prioritise projects that align with the core objectives of Mission Ocean, ensuring a strong thematic and geographic focus on key regions such as the Baltic, North Sea, Black Sea, Atlantic/Arctic, and Mediterranean, along with their associated river systems.

1.1.1. Access types

Transnational Access (TA) is defined as free of charge, transnational access to research infrastructures or installations for selected user groups. The access includes the logistical, technological and scientific support and the specific training that is usually provided to external researchers using the infrastructure.

Remote Access (RA) is a form of Transnational Access in which the user(s) do not visit the infrastructure or installation physically themselves, instead the staff of the infrastructure or installation conducts the study/collects the samples/does the monitoring for the user(s) according to their research plan.

Virtual Access (VA) means free and open access to stations' data and databases for everyone, without selection or evaluation processes. Those interested in Virtual Access do not have to apply for Virtual Access as part of a TA call.

1.1.2. Proposal submission

Check carefully if you fulfil the **AQUARIUS Eligibility Criteria (see below)** before submitting your application.

Proposals must be submitted using the online [Transnational Access Platform](#) (TAP).

Instructions on how to use the TAP, as well as background documents and **mandatory templates** (except the recommendation letter) are available in the document library of the TAP and at: https://aquarius-ri.eu/additional-links-and-resources/

The following **attachments** must be included with the application:
- Research plan (max. 10 pages),
- Curriculum Vitae of the main applicant (TA user group leader) (max. 2 pages),
- Initial Data Management Plan (DMP). More details can be found here,
- Recommendation letter: Applicants such as PhD students and Master's or Bachelor's students applying to be TA User Group Leaders must include a signed letter of recommendation from their academic supervisor and/or another relevant person.

1.1.3. Research plan

The research plan is a mandatory annex to the application. It must follow the structure specified in the instructions for the research plan and can be a maximum 12 pages in length (excluding the CV, DMP or recommendation letter). Research plans that do not adhere to the specified structure and exceed the length limit will be excluded from the assessment.

1.1.4 Logistical requirements

Pay particular attention to information on research permits and special logistical requirements that are necessary for some infrastructures (import and export licences, diplomatic clearance, etc.). Check the AQUARIUS infrastructure catalogue for availability, area of operation, and requirements of the infrastructures. We recommend contacting the infrastructure operator at an early stage regarding exact availability, technical capabilities, interoperability with other infrastructures, necessary permits, etc.

1.2. Description of the calls

1.2.1. Call 1 – Regional Lighthouse Access Call

The **Regional Lighthouse Access Call** is looking for applications that address scientific challenges in the EU lighthouse regions. In deliverable 3.1, AQUARIUS has listed the scientific and societal priorities and challenges that are of particular focus in the respective lighthouse regions. Applications are strongly encouraged to focus on the challenges listed in the Lighthouse access call and take place in the relevant lighthouse regions.
Applications that also integrate challenges and regions from another lighthouse region can also qualify.

Table 1 organises the key research challenges into five main themes for the four lighthouse regions, as defined in AQUARIUS deliverables 3.1 and 3.3. A more detailed overview of the lines of action and the scientific and societal challenges of the AQUARIUS calls can be found in deliverable 3.3.

Region	Marine Resources & Ecosystem Management	Pollution & Biodiversity	Blue Economy	Climate Change	Societal Engagement
Atlantic-Arctic	Sustainable management of marine resources	Monitoring Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), biodiversity changes, and interaction between species	N/A	Climate Change Impact Assessment, understanding vulnerability of local communities	Engaging local communities, combining traditional knowledge and scientific research, ensuring equity
Danube River	Ecosystem restoration (river basin and wetlands/floodplains), innovation transfer for water management	Improving water quality and habitats, understanding pressures on freshwater and marine ecosystems	N/A	Nature-based solutions for extreme phenomena (floods, droughts), cumulative pressure assessment	Public awareness on habitat restoration, aligning with EU and regional policies
Mediterranean Sea	N/A	Enhancing biodiversity monitoring, mitigating marine pollution (oil, hazardous substances)	Sustainable blue economy development (tourism, aquaculture)	Understanding ecosystem resilience to environmental stressors	Public engagement in marine conservation, enhancing regional cooperation
Baltic & North Sea	Restoration of marine habitats, supporting sustainable fisheries and aquaculture	Studying cumulative impacts of pollution (nutrients, chemicals), noise, and other stressors on marine biodiversity	Circular economy, green shipping, multipurpose platforms, blue economy solutions (wind parks, aquaculture)	Managing multi-stressors, exploring CO_2 storage impacts, shifting fuel emissions (e.g., from diesel to LNG)	Optimizing marine space usage (e.g. wind farms, aquaculture), mitigating habitat loss, public engagement in conservation efforts

1.2.2.   Call 2 – Super-integrated Lighthouse Call

The second AQUARIUS call, the "Super-integrated Lighthouse Call" will be responsive and shaped by the outcomes of the first call. It will focus on new emerging issues, themes not adequately covered in Call 1, or developments within the EU Mission Ocean.

Call 2 is expected to focus more on the key challenges identified for call 1 that affect more than one of the lighthouse regions. This approach will ensure that the Super-integrated Lighthouse Call is even more flexible than Call 1 in terms of cross-cutting topics and regions and can respond to the evolving needs and priorities of the research community and stakeholders.

1.3. Call timing

- The first call will open on November 11, 2024, and will remain open for the submission of proposals until January 20, 2025.
- The second call will open on September 2, 2025, and will remain open for two months. The closing date will be October 28, 2025.

The portal for the submission of applications will be closed at 23:59 CEST on the closing date of each of the calls, respectively. Applications received after the closing date and time of the call will not be considered.

1.4. Available infrastructures

The infrastructures offered in AQUARIUS are categorised in the following nine categories:

1) Research Vessels
2) Marine Mobile Observation Platforms
3) Fixed Marine Facilities
4) Experimental Research Facilities
5) River & Basin Supersites
6) Aircrafts
7) Drones
8) Satellite Services
9) Data Centers & Virtual Labs

For more information on AQUARIUS TA calls and on the infrastructure capabilities, schedule and geographic areas offered visit the infrastructure catalogue at https://aquarius-ri.eu/ri-catalogue/.

The infrastructures available as part of the individual TA calls can be found on the AQUARIUS website and the TAP.

2. Eligibility Criteria

Transnational Access (TA) or Remote Access (RA) will be provided to selected 'user groups'. User groups are teams of one or more researchers (users) led by a 'user group leader', also understood as principal investigator (PI) or chief scientist. A user group eligible for TA must meet the following **strict criteria**:

1. **Affiliation/Country of work:**

    1.1 The user group leader (PI) and the majority of the users must work in a country other than the country(ies) where the installation is located (unless access is

provided by an international organisation, the Joint Research Centre (JRC), an ERIC or similar legal entity).

1.2 The user group leader and the designated leader of the team conducting the fieldwork (also understood as chief/co-chief scientist) must be affiliated to the same institution.

2. **International collaboration:** The proposals for the AQUARIUS TA calls must involve at least three partners from three different countries.

3. **Dissemination:** Only user groups that are allowed to disseminate the results and knowledge they have generated in the context of the access may benefit from the TA, unless they are working for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

4. **Expertise:** The user group leader (and designated chief scientist, if applicable) must have the appropriate scientific/ technical expertise to conduct proposed work.

5. **European Mission Ocean 2030 scientific challenges**: User groups must make it clear how the proposed work contributes to selected priorities/challenges of the TA calls and the objectives of the European Mission Ocean 2030 according to AQUARIUS Deliverable 3.1 - AQUARIUS call priority and D6.1 – Data gaps report.

6. **Access limit**: Access for user groups with a majority of users not working in a EU Member State or Horizon Europe associated country is limited to 20% of the total amount of units of access provided by AQUARIUS. I.e., at least 80% of the total units of access provided by the AQUARIUS project will be granted to parties with the majority of users working in a EU Member State or Horizon Europe associated country.

The non-fulfilment of any of the previous criteria implies the non-acceptance of the application for further evaluation.

3. Terms and Conditions

3.1. Terms and Conditions for Funding

3.1.1. Eligible costs

1. Funding is provided for accessing the Research Infrastructures owned by the AQUARIUS beneficiaries. For the estimated number of days' access available, please refer to the respective infrastructure profile in the AQUARIUS RI Catalogue. There is flexibility to increase length/days of access if well justified and logistically feasible. Additional days may be funded if logistically and economically feasible and/or can be chartered independently of AQUARIUS funding, if agreed with the infrastructure operator.

2. Access to the AQUARIUS research infrastructures (from 01.03.2024 to 29.02.2028) is free of charge for the selected user groups. It covers the entire use of the infrastructures (in some cases with berth restrictions), including the logistical, technological and scientific support for external researchers using the research infrastructure. Furthermore, it includes costs directly incurred to

implement the project (e.g. consumables, chemicals, shipping of samples, customs of users own equipment), and other standard operating costs.

3. The access time can be granted in a single stage or in several stages, depending on the recommendations of the AQUARIUS Scientific Expert Panel and Operational Expert Panel.

4. Estimated travel and logistics' budget should be described in the TAP and can include costs such as the scientific party's travel and subsistence costs from their home institution to the infrastructure and back, accommodation and meals en-route and possible freight and logistic costs.

5. The amount of the travelling expenses for the user group and the transport of the equipment to the individual infrastructures can be negotiated after the positive scientific evaluation of the proposal.

6. Accommodation and meals may be provided free of charge during the access period (e.g. on board some Research Vessels) but please check with the infrastructure operator in advance. If this is not the case, accommodation and meals onboard can also be requested as part of the travel and subsistence costs applied for.

There is a limited travel and logistics budget available to cover selected users' direct travel and logistics costs incurred while accessing the infrastructures. The amounts vary for each infrastructure so please check the infrastructure profile page for confirmation.

3.1.2. Non-eligible costs

The following costs are not eligible, and are NOT REIMBURSED by the AQUARIUS Transnational Access programme or infrastructure operator. Therefore, do NOT include these in the budget:

1. Additional or third-party costs, such as salary costs or personnel costs of any kind, equipment manufacture, repair and rental of (scientific) equipment, sub-contracting and assistance, vaccination and health care costs, publication, overheads and the costs of analysing and evaluating the research samples or results after the TA has been carried out.

2. Insurance costs, or any extra costs of unforeseen circumstances related to travel (e.g. delays or cancellations), bar bills, and other extra services at the place of accommodation. AQUARIUS has no legal responsibility for the health and welfare, including emergency and accident situations, of those who are awarded AQUARIUS Transnational Access.

3.1.3. Remote Access

Include only logistics costs (freight) into the budget, as in remote access the applicants will not be visiting or using the infrastructures themselves and the infrastructure

staff/technicians will do the sampling/monitoring and send the samples/data to the TA users.

3.2. Further Access Conditions

1. **Access time.**

    a) The maximum duration of access granted to a user group requesting visits to the RI offered in AQUARIUS should be less than three months.

    b) The access time funded by AQUARIUS might be extended providing sufficient complementary funding by the applicant for additional days time. The leveraging of funds from other sources for a portion of the total amount of access-time applied for is encouraged and should be clearly stated in the application. However, cross funding from other EU projects is not permitted. The access or work funded already by another EU project cannot be proposed to AQUARIUS funding.

    c) Allocated RI time includes mobilisation in the place of departure and demobilisation at the end of the project (vessels). Please contact the RI operator for concrete calculations of mobilisation/demobilisation time and estimated passage time (vessels) to the work area and include this time in your research plan/number of days' requested.

    d) AQUARIUS funded access may form part of longer cruises or fieldwork with different working groups included. Applicants should incorporate this possibility as required in their proposals when applying for RI access.

    e) If the number of funded units of access is reduced by the AQUARIUS Consortium for any reason or if the Research Infrastructures are prevented from working (e.g. by poor weather or technical difficulties) no form of compensation shall be payable in respect of any time lost. Please note that the RI schedules are subject to change.

2. **Liability**: RI users should note that installation and operation of any equipment that they bring to the RI is done at their own risk, even when it is carried on board or deployed from a research vessel or other kinds of RIs. Further details will be provided during the negotiation phase.

3. **Signature of agreements and affiliation.**

    The institution of the user group leader (PI of an application) has the responsibility to sign the access agreement(s).

    Applicants (and user-groups) must comply with all affiliation regulations. Any change in the user group composition must be notified to AQUARIUS and will be subject to approval.

    The following agreements may be accepted or signed during the negotiation phase:

a) Acceptance agreement, in which the institution of the user group leader accepts the conditions of the AQUARIUS consortium regarding responsibilities and obligations (e.g. reporting, access conditions, data publication, reimbursement).

b) Between the PI of a funded project and the RI operator, if applicable. The beneficiary giving access to its infrastructure may require an additional contract laying out terms and conditions of access, detailing the support granted, reporting, liability, applicable safety/security regulations and modalities of payment of travel and subsistence costs of the scientific party.

4. **Ethics:** Regarding the access to infrastructures and any research funded through AQUARIUS, facilitated or executed therein, the ethical standards and guidelines of Horizon Europe will be rigorously applied, regardless of the country in which the research is carried out.

5. **Encouraging integration.**

   a) Users can select an unlimited number of infrastructures from the nine infrastructure categories offered as part of AQUARIUS. The selection and integration of at least two infrastructures from multiple categories is strongly encouraged.

   b) Proposals are strongly encouraged to include scientists from less well-equipped countries and an advanced training or educational element for scientists or technicians in their projects.

   c) Collaboration with researchers from the Ukraine and researchers with refugee status, as well as the inclusion of industry, is encouraged.

6. **Data Management:** Funded TA research projects and user groups will implement data management plans (DMPs) for each TA project, which will be supervised and reviewed by assigned data centres. Researchers from the awarded projects will be educated in open science practices, European marine data infrastructures, and FAIR standards, services and tools to use for processing, documenting, and ingesting their newly collected marine data and resulting data products.

3.3. Evaluation and Selection Procedure

The incoming proposals received by the specified submission date will be checked for compliance with the eligibility criteria by the Call Management Office (CMO). Afterwards, the proposal is preliminary reviewed by the Operational Expert Panel (OEP) to check whether the logistical framework for the TA is fulfilled. In the following, the proposals are scientifically evaluated by members of the Scientific Evaluation Panel (SEP) and external, independent scientific experts.

Each application is assessed according to several evaluation criteria: Each criterion is scored from 1-5, where 1=weak, 2=satisfactory, 3=average, 4=good, 5=excellent. The individual assessment criteria are weighted differently, with the scientific and technical quality of the planned research being the most important. The ranking of the

applications is based on the total number of points that the applications have received for the criteria.

After the individual evaluation, the SEP meets for a consensus evaluation and draws up a ranking list of proposals and a shortlist of user groups recommended for funding. After the final recommendation of the Scientific Expert Panel, high ranked proposals will be examined by the AQUARIUS Operational Expert Panel (OEP) to determine the logistical feasibility of the proposed work. The decisions are finalised by the infrastructure operators, based on the recommendations from the SEP and OEP.

3.4. Reporting

Upon completion of a funded transnational access, the user group leader must submit a digital TA project report (in English) via the TAP, within two months of the completion of the access. The TA report is designed to describe the scientific work carried out during the TA, how the work plan was fulfilled, how the results of the TA contribute to the theme and objectives of the call and if there are new discoveries, innovative and industrial potential of the work and results, or applied research investigations.

A **TA report template** will be provided prior to access commencement. The AQUARIUS Scientific Expert Panel may request further information/clarifications (or re-submission of the report) within a reasonable time-frame.

Publications arising in connection with AQUARIUS-funded projects will later be entered in the TAP.

3.5. Acknowledgements

All results/publications/presentations/publicity arising from AQUARIUS funded TA should include a reference to the source of funding and the infrastructure used, referring to support given by the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation under grant agreement No 101130915.

Accordingly, the END USER must mention the following:

- The research leading to these results was funded by AQUARIUS. AQUARIUS received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation under grant agreement No 101130915; and
- the participation of the INFRASTRUCTURE OPERATOR.

This article applies to all publications containing the results developed, acquired or obtained in the framework of the TA project.

3.6. AQUARIUS Data Policy concerning TA

AQUARIUS has adopted an open data policy, which will be implemented with a dedicated Data Management approach, to ensure that all gathered and generated metadata and data will be managed in line with the FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable). In order to ensure quality assurance, long-term stewardship and wide access and use of the data collected in the AQUARIUS TA projects, it is

envisaged that the data and metadata, and possible resulting data products, become part of the repositories managed and operated by the leading European data management infrastructures. The AQUARIUS approach is documented in **Deliverable 6.2 – AQUARIUS Data Management Plan**.

TA applicants must create an initial Data Management Plan following the AQUARIUS DMP template (available in the TAP document library) and submit it as part of their TA application via the TAP. The initial DMP is not part of the scientific evaluation.

The AQUARIUS Data Management approach is aimed at inclusion and publishing of the data collected/generated during a TA project as open metadata and data in trusted repositories, within the lifetime of the AQUARIUS project. However, temporary embargos (max. 2 years after collection) are possible for specific data that require additional processing and to allow for scientific analyses that will lead to scientific papers.

4. Technical information on infrastructures

In preparation of their respective proposal, applicants are advised to consult the AQUARIUS research infrastructures catalogue on the technical capabilities and interoperability of the infrastructures. Please consider the number of technicians needed to operate specific marine equipment when requesting a certain number of berths in a project.
Please contact the infrastructure operators directly or aquarius@marine.ie for more details, if needed.

5. Application procedure

Proposal submission involves the steps outlined below. Proposals have to be submitted exclusively via the AQUARIUS Transnational Access Platform (TAP). Please note that a user can **only submit one application per call as user group leader**. However, it is possible for a user group leader to be a member of a user group in other AQUARIUS applications of the same call.

1) **Register** on the AQUARIUS TAP and activate your account.

2) **Contact the operators** of the RI to which you are requesting access to find out whether your proposal can be implemented in the RI as planned.

3) Fill in the **TA application form** in the TAP. The application consist of two parts.

   A: General information about the proposal, applicants (user group leader/principal investigator and user group) and technical/logistical information regarding the proposed TA.

   B: Document/appendices upload to the TAP. The following documents have to be uploaded as unprotected pdf file.
      1) **Research plan.** Applicants should follow the AQUARIUS research plan template, provided in the TAP document library (mandatory).
      2) **CV of the user group leader**, using the dedicated CV template in the TAP document library (mandatory).

3) **Preliminary/Initial Data Management Plan**, using the dedicated [DMP template](#) in the TAP document library and specified in AQUARIUS [deliverable 6.2](#) (mandatory).

4) Optional: **Letter of Recommendation** for applicants without a PhD.

4) **Review and submit** your application. On the finalisation of the proposal submission the TAP will automatically generate an Application Summary for review before final submission.

The evaluation of proposals will be based upon the information provided in the completed application form, which should be correct, sufficient and adequate for this purpose, taking into consideration the outlined evaluation criteria.

6. Privacy Policy

The handling of Personal Data as part of the AQUARIUS Transnational Access application, evaluation and reporting process is in accordance with Data Protection Legislation. Please carefully read the [AQUARIUS Privacy and Cookies Policy](#) for more information on how your Personal Data is handled.

All applicants who wish to query the outcome of their application and/or the processing of their personal data may contact AQUARIUS via the contact email at the [AQUARIUS website](#).

7. Contact Information

For general questions regarding AQUARIUS and the RI, please contact: aquarius@marine.ie.

For questions regarding the AQUARIUS TA calls and the scientific proposal evaluation, please contact: aquarius.eu@awi.de.

For technical questions about the AQUARIUS TAP, contact: aquarius@inkode.it.