



Operational Expert Panel Selection Report

Lead Beneficiary Organisation: RBINS

Lieven Naudts (RBINS), Frank Armstrong (MI)



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Lead Author (Org)	RBINS
Contributing Author(s)	Lieven Naudts (RBINS), Frank Armstrong (MI)
Reviewers	Jukka Seppälä (Syke)
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1. Introduction

AQUARIUS will provide a highly comprehensive suite of integrated research infrastructures appropriate to addressing significant challenges for the long-term sustainability of our unique oceans, seas and freshwater ecosystems. An impressive range of 57 research infrastructure services is available including research vessels, mobile marine observation platforms, aircraft, drones, satellite services, sensors, fixed freshwater and marine observatories and test sites, experimental facilities, and sophisticated data infrastructures. 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 AQUARIUS Work Package (WP) 4 is devoted to the Research Infrastructure Access Facilitation, Management and Governance within AQUARIUS. The tasks in this WP include the creation of the Online Infrastructures' Catalogue, TA logistics evaluations, the creation and maintenance of an online schedule of TA projects, and TA administration, which includes creating an end-user agreement for confirmed TA projects, monitoring the TA budget to ensure cost-effectiveness, and supporting projects through planning and implementation.

The following are the two TA calls that AQUARIUS will administrate:

- 1) Call 1: **Regional Lighthouse Access Call**. This call is looking for applications that address scientific challenges in the EU Lighthouse regions.
- 2) Call 2: **Super-integrated Lighthouse Call**. This call will be responsive and shaped by the outcomes of the first call.

The scheduled dates of the AQUARIUS TA calls are the following:

- 1) Call 1: open **11th November 2024 – 20th January 2025**
- 2) Call 2: open **2nd September 2025 – 28th October 2025**

The TA calls in AQUARIUS 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.

This deliverable is dedicated to the logistic evaluation and selection process of the proposals submitted to the TA Call 1 – "Regional Lighthouse Access Call". It outlines the members of the OEP, the methodology used in the logistical evaluation, and the outcomes of the assessment process, including recommendations for scheduling and access allocation. In this first AQUARIUS TA Call, AQUARIUS offered access to all infrastructures listed in the [AQUARIUS Infrastructure Catalogue](#).

1.1. Available infrastructures

The research infrastructures (RIs) that were offered in the first AQUARIUS TA call 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) Aircraft
- 7) Drones
- 8) Satellite Services
- 9) Data Centres & Virtual Labs

2. The AQUARIUS evaluation system and process

The AQUARIUS proposal evaluation system is based on evaluation structures, procedures and best practices from previous Transnational Access projects (e.g. EUROFLEETS 1, 2 & Plus, ARICE, INTERACCESS, JERICO, JERICO-NEXT, JERICO-S3 and ASSEMBLE Plus). A detailed explanation of the evaluation system is provided in [deliverable D3.5 \(AWI\)](#).

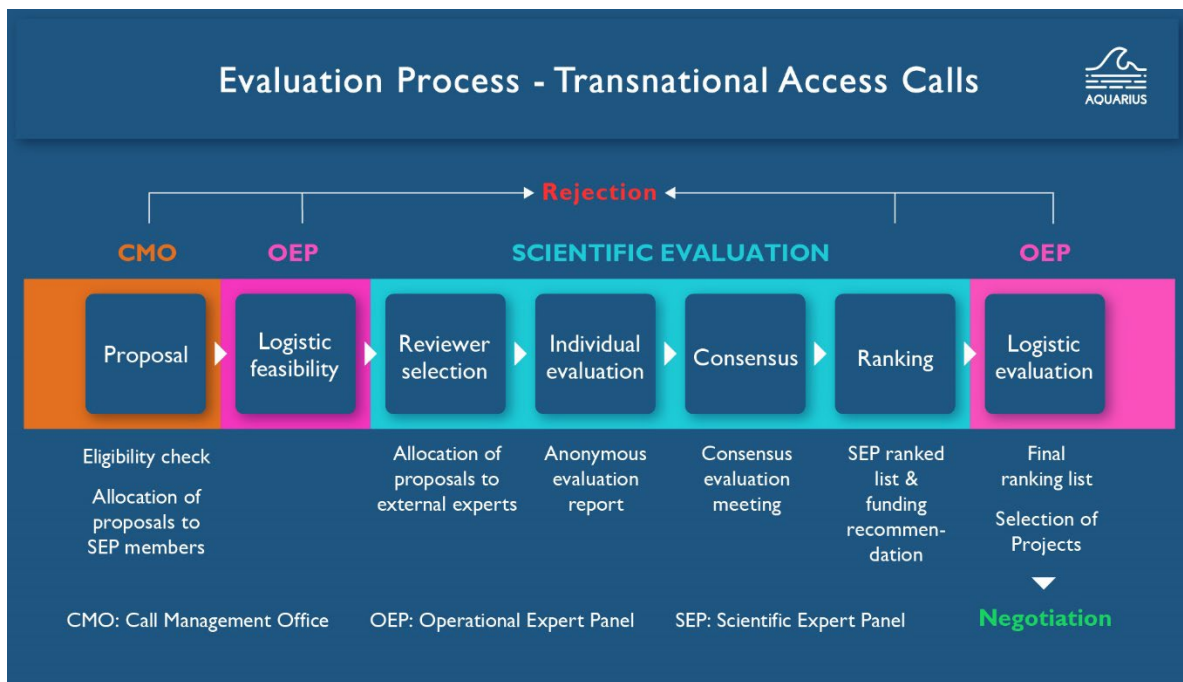


Figure 1: Workflow and different steps involved in the AQUARIUS evaluation procedure

3. Operational Expert Panel

3.1. AQUARIUS Operational Expert Panel

The AQUARIUS OEP is composed of experienced professionals representing each of the AQUARIUS Regional Lighthouse areas. Their collective expertise in research vessel operations, marine technology, and infrastructure management ensures a robust and regionally informed evaluation of the practical aspects of each proposal. The members of the AQUARIUS OEP are as follows, grouped within their respective lighthouse region:

Atlantic/Arctic Lighthouse

- **Aodhán Fitzgerald** – Research Vessel Operations Manager, Marine Institute, Ireland.
- **Gerard Dooly** – Lecturer in Robotics & Automation, Co-Director of Centre for Robotics & Intelligent Systems (CRIS), University of Limerick, Ireland.

Baltic & North Sea Lighthouse

- **Lieven Naudts** – Coordinator RV Belgica & Head of Measurement Services Ostend, Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Belgium.

Black Sea Lighthouse

- **Dr. Dan-Lucian Vasiliu** – Director, Constanta Branch, GeoEcoMar (National Institute for Marine Geology and Geocology), Romania.

Mediterranean Sea Lighthouse

- **Simo Cusi** – Engineering and Logistics Officer, EMSO ERIC; Specialist in technology development and best practices at EMSO regional facilities, Italy.

To ensure impartiality and maintain the integrity of the evaluation process, all OEP members were required to sign the Operational Expert Panel Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Declaration (Appendix 1). This declaration confirmed that panel members would disclose any potential conflicts of interest and uphold strict confidentiality regarding the content and outcomes of the proposal evaluations.

4. Outcome of the first AQUARIUS Transnational Access Call

Eighteen proposals were submitted in response to the first AQUARIUS Transnational Access Call. After an eligibility check conducted by the Call Management Office (WP3 lead, AWI), seventeen proposals were deemed eligible for further scientific and logistical evaluation in accordance with the AQUARIUS evaluation workflow.

One proposal was found ineligible because it did not meet the eligibility criteria requiring that proposals must involve at least three partners from three different countries.

4.1. Initial Logistics Feasibility Review

In support of Task 3.5, the OEP met online to conduct an initial logistical feasibility review (also referred to as a Logistical Pre Check) following the eligibility check. This review evaluated whether the logistical framework for Transnational Access (TA) under AQUARIUS was met. All 5 members of the OEP attended the meeting, including representatives from the AQUARIUS Call Management Office and Project Coordination Office. The meeting was held on 28th January 2025, one week after the first Call had closed.

Each of the 17 eligible proposals were reviewed against the following criteria:

- Operational Areas
- Infrastructure availability and capability
- Required permits and authorizations
- Environmental parameters
- Safety and risk considerations
- Budget and costing appropriateness

AQUARIUS Call 1 Logistical Pre Check Review Criteria 28.01.2025

Research Project Acronym:	Proposal 1	Proposal 2	Etc...
1. Operational Areas			
1.1. Is the requested infrastructure capable of operating in the proposed location? (e.g., ocean basin, depth, range, proximity to base facilities)			
Feedback:			
2. Infrastructure and Availability			
2.1. Can the RIs be scheduled during the requested time?			
Feedback:			
2.2. Are the requested RIs interoperable?			
Feedback:			
2.3 Can RI host the number of scientists who want to go on board/use it?			
Feedback:			
3. Permits and Authorizations			
3.1. Does the project require any specific permits (e.g., diplomatic clearance, environmental permits etc)?			
Feedback:			
4. Environmental Conditions			
4.1. Are seasonal conditions (e.g., storms, ice, daylight hours) favourable during the proposed time?			
Feedback:			
6. Safety and Risk			
6.1. Are the proposed operations safe for the infrastructure and personnel?			
Feedback:			
7. Budget and Costs			
7.1 Any severe mistakes in calculating the estimated access, travel, and shipment			
Feedback:			

Table 1: Logistical Pre Check Review Criteria

Based on the outcomes of the Logistical Pre Check, all 17 eligible proposals were deemed logistically realistic and achievable, with all infrastructures appearing interoperable despite the diversity involved.

4.2. Outcome of the Scientific Evaluation

Following the Logistical Pre Check, all 17 proposals were passed to the Scientific Evaluation Panel (SEP) for their recommendations. The SEP recommended the following during the consensus evaluation meetings: 11 proposals were proposed for scheduling with highest (A) priority, 3 were ranked in category B – on hold pending the outcome of the A ranked logistical evaluations – and 3 were not recommended for funding (C) (Table 2 below). The proposals in category C were not considered for the logistic evaluation. Further detail on the outcome of the Scientific Evaluations, including information on the panel themselves, has been provided in [deliverable D3.5 \(AWI\)](#).

Table 2: Proposals recommended for scheduling by the SEP

PROPOSAL ID	PROPOSAL ACRONYM	REQUESTED RI(S)	2ND RI	OPTION	OVERALL RANKING
26	DENGATE	RV G. O. Sars, AUV Barabas, Glider Yoko	RV Celtic Explorer, AUV Barabas, Glider Yoko		A1
29	ROCK-IT	RV Celtic Explorer	RV Sarmiento de Gamboa		A2
16	BASEVOC	Utö Marine and Atmospheric Research Station	RV Aranda		A3
8	BlueCFjords	RV Celtic Explorer	RV G. O. Sars		A4
22	ABACUS 2026	SOCIB Glider Facility			A5
30	E(ddies)GC	RV Arni Fridriksson	RV G. O. Sars		A6
18	AR7E-2026	RV Celtic Explorer			A7
11	GREAT	UL_MRE-ROV, RV Celtic Explorer	RV G. O. Sars		A8
19	ASTRA	RV Tubitak Marmara			A9
21	STREAM-DANUBE	RV Mare Nigrum	RV Tubitak Marmara		A10
17	CRUST	RV Jákup Sverri	RV Celtic Explorer		A11
27	DeepConnect	UL_MRE-ROV, RV Celtic Explorer, AUV Barabas			B1
7	TIDE	UL Inspection ROV, RV Thalassa			B2
23	DEEP-IMPACT	RV Aegaeo, Max Rover, South Adriatic Sea E2M3A EMSO Regional Facility, EMBRC-SBR, EMBRC-OOB	RV Thalassa		B3

4.3. Outcome of the Logistical Evaluation

After the final recommendation by the SEP, the proposals that scored an 'A' or 'B' were logistically evaluated to further determine the feasibility and timing of the proposed work. RI managers could confirm the requested access to their RI or propose changes in terms of access units, access time or budget.

There were 14 proposals submitted for logistical evaluation, however one 'A' ranked proposal (**BlueCFjords**) was withdrawn early as the same proposal had been submitted through the POLARIN project (Grant ID 101130949) TA Call, and was successful in securing access.

The remaining 13 proposals were reviewed in detail. Of these, 10 were 'A'-ranked and considered operationally feasible based on the requested infrastructures and the objectives outlined in their research plans. Later, following the logistics evaluations for the 'A' ranked proposal, the 'B' ranked proposals were also logistically evaluated leading to one 'B' ranked proposal being deemed logistically feasible and recommended for scheduling. The evaluations of these proposals are summarised below.

4.3.1. DENGATE

Proposal ID: 26, Overall Ranking: A1

DENGATE aimed to integrate 3 AQUARIUS infrastructures and required an infrastructure operators' meeting to determine the interoperability of the requested research vessel with the two marine mobile observation platforms requested. This was held online with the respective operators who were confident about achieving the proposal's aims. All agreed, however, that the access units be increased by 2 days for each infrastructure to allow for mobilisation and integration of the mobile platforms on board the research vessel.

4.3.2. Rock-IT

Proposal ID: 29, Overall Ranking: A2

This proposal faced logistical challenges due to the remote location of the proposed work and availability of the preferred research vessel. Evaluation is ongoing, pending confirmation from the second-choice vessel and potential exploration of alternative options.

4.3.3. BASEVOC

Proposal ID: 16, Overall Ranking: A3

The logistical evaluation for this proposal was straightforward. One important aspect to be considered was that the applicant required access to the infrastructure (Uto, Fixed Marine Facility) on the 1st of April 2025 to begin taking measurements. This was communicated to the operator who agreed that access could be arranged as soon as needed.

4.3.4. ABACUS 2026

Proposal ID: 22, Overall Ranking: A5

The ABACUS proposal aims to carry out 2 glider missions with the SOCIB Glider Facility in the Mediterranean sea in Summer 2026. The proposal requested 50 days of operational access in addition to 4 days access for wrap up and data sharing. Following talks with the infrastructure operator, a timeline for scheduling these missions was agreed, and access was confirmed with the PI.

4.3.5. E(ddies)GC

Proposal ID: 30, Overall Ranking: A6

This proposal requested access to the RV Arni Fridriksson for a 10-day survey East of Greenland between the Denmark Strait and Fram Strait. The operator confirmed that the work could be scheduled in 2026 and thus access was confirmed.

4.3.6. AR7E-2026

Proposal ID: 18, Overall Ranking: A7

The logistical evaluation of this proposal involving the RV Celtic Explorer initially identified the need to change the demobilisation port from Nuuk to Iceland – most likely Reykjavik – to align with the vessel’s schedule. As part of the planning process, AR7E-2026 was later scheduled as an ‘out and back’ survey, returning to Galway, where it had mobilised, rather than proceeding to Iceland for demobilising. The adjustment was communicated to the applicant, who requested an additional two days of access to accommodate this change to the original work plan, a shelf survey off the southern end of Cape Farewell, Greenland. The request was approved in coordination with the vessel operator, and a total of 22 days’ access was granted.

4.3.7. GREAT

Proposal ID: 11, Overall Ranking: A8

The logistical evaluation of GREAT involved an interoperability meeting between the vessel operator of RV Celtic Explorer and ROV operator of the UL_MRE ROV. In order to save on ROV transport costs and for the efficient use of time and resources, it was initially agreed that the ROV would be mobilised while the vessel was in its home port preparing for a preceding survey. The ROV could then remain onboard the vessel for the duration of the preceding survey. This plan was later scrapped, as the preceding survey (AR7E-2026) would become an ‘out and back’ survey, and so demobilisation would take place in Galway, rather than Iceland. The logistical evaluation also deemed it necessary to demobilise in the home port rather than near the work area (Iceland) to simplify the demobilisation and transport logistics of the ROV and associated launch and recovery systems. This change of demobilisation port resulted in an increase in the number of requested units of access by 3 days to account for the transit to the demob port during which time the ROV demobilisation can begin and acquired data processed.

4.3.8. ASTRA

Proposal ID: 19, Overall Ranking: A9

The main logistical consideration for this proposal which aimed to utilise the RV Tubitak Marmara was that the applicant intended to carry out their survey in September 2025, 8 months after the closing date of Call 1. The applicant had already been having preliminary discussions with the vessel operator during proposal writing, and therefore a window of opportunity had already been scheduled into the vessel’s calendar. After the SEP had made their recommendations, contact was swiftly made with the vessel operator to begin any necessary longer-term planning preparations for the survey, i.e., diplomatic clearance applications. The survey is scheduled to commence in mid-September 2025.

4.3.9. STREAM-DANUBE

Proposal ID: 21, Overall Ranking: A10

Similar to above, the PI for Stream-Danube also intended work to commence on board the RV Mare Nigrum in September 2025. This was communicated well in advance to the vessel operator in case of a need to apply for relevant diplomatic clearances or permits, and currently the survey is scheduled to commence in early September 2025.

4.3.10. CRUST

Proposal ID: 17, Overall Ranking: A11

Scheduling conflicts with the requested research vessel's national commitments have delayed completion of the logistical evaluation. Alternative timings were considered but the proposed work plan must be implemented during the summer months/fair weather due to the planned ROV and dredging work. Alternative vessels are being considered including the RV Thalassa, with discussions still ongoing with this vessel's operators (IFREMER) to determine the vessel's capability to achieve the proposal's objectives.

4.3.11. DeepConnect

Proposal ID: 19, Overall Ranking: B1

Following the logistical assessment of all 'A'-ranked proposals, the scheduling of 'B'-ranked proposals was then considered. DeepConnect had identified the RV Celtic Explorer as its preferred research infrastructure (RI). However, due to high demand for this vessel – as well as for other vessels operating in the Atlantic and Arctic regions – scheduling capacity is currently unavailable. As a result, the proposal remains on hold for the time being.

4.3.12. TIDE

Proposal ID: 7, Overall Ranking: B2

During the logistical evaluation of the TIDE proposal, the vessel operator determined that the requested vessel, RV Thalassa, was unsuitable for the proposed operations due to the nature of the close, and shallow inshore work, and therefore the proposal was deemed not logistically feasible. The applicant was informed of this and was encouraged to reapply in Call 2 with an amended work plan.

4.3.13. Deep-Impact: B3

This proposal was initially placed on hold pending the outcome of the A-ranked proposals' logistical evaluations. The proposal, which aims to integrate five AQUARIUS research infrastructures, appears logistically feasible based on the capabilities of the infrastructures and the requested timeframes. RI operators have been contacted regarding the possibility of scheduling the work in 2026, and the logistical evaluation is still ongoing.

Table 3: Proposals with access confirmed following logistical evaluation

REQUESTED RI(s)	PROJECT NAME	SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE	AREA	FUNDED UNITS	ACCESS
RV G. O. Sars, AUV Barabas, Glider Yoko	DENGATE	Global change & Climate observation	Atlantic-Arctic	RV G. O. Sars (14 days), AUV Barabas (16 days), Glider Yoko (16 days), 46 Days Total	
Utö Marine and Atmospheric Research Station	BASEVOC	Oceanography	Baltic Sea	100 Days Total	
SOCIB Glider Facility	ABACUS 2026	Oceanography	Mediterranean Sea	54 Days Total	
RV Arni Fridriksson	E(ddies)GC	Oceanography	Atlantic-Arctic	10 Days Total	
RV Celtic Explorer	AR7E-2026	Oceanography	Atlantic-Arctic	22 Days Total	
UL_MRE-ROV, RV Celtic Explorer	GREAT	Ecosystems and Biodiversity	Atlantic-Arctic	UL_MRE-ROV (19 Days) RV Celtic Explorer (19 Days) 38 Days Total	
RV Tubitak Marmara	ASTRA	Oceanography	Black Sea	15 Days Total	
RV Mare Nigrum	STREAM-DANUBE	Oceanography	Danube River	13 Days Total	
RV Aegaeo, MAX ROVER, E2M3A, EMBRC-SBR, EMBRC-OOB	DEEP-IMPACT	Oceanography	Mediterranean	81 Units Total	

Both the Scientific and Operational Expert Panels successfully completed their respective evaluations. The two-step process – prioritising scientific excellence followed by logistical feasibility – ensures that only high-quality, achievable proposals are awarded access through the AQUARIUS programme.

4.4. Summary

To date, eight 'A' ranked proposals, and one 'B' ranked proposal have been confirmed for access in Call 1. Pending the logistic evaluations of two ongoing 'A' proposals and one 'B' proposal, if successfully scheduled there will be upward of 390 access units awarded to projects fully funded from the first AQUARIUS Regional Lighthouse Call.

5. Recommendations for Call 2

5.1. Early Engagement with RI Operators

Several successful proposals in the first call demonstrated the value of early coordination with infrastructure operators. It was clear from certain proposals that contact had already been made between the applicant and the RI operators which was key in particular when the timeline was very short (between 2 and 8 months) between applicants' submissions and their preferred timeframe to implement the project. For Call 2 it should be further encouraged to contact operators during proposal development. This proactive approach can help identify potential scheduling conflicts, clarify technical feasibility, and ensure that the proposed work aligns with infrastructure capabilities and availability.

5.2. Consider Additional Time for Vessel Mob/Demob

Two proposals in call 1, required additional access units to be granted to account for sufficient mobilisation and demobilisation days. This came to light following interoperability meetings between the RI Operators, highlighting the importance of open communication channels as early as possible. Call 2 should include clear guidance for all applicants on estimating these logistical needs, particularly when they plan to integrate multiple infrastructure in one proposal.

5.3. Contingency Planning

Two proposals in particular encountered logistical challenges due to their reliance on highly demanded research vessel. For Call 2, applicants should be encouraged to list alternative research infrastructure preferences. Of the 17 proposals initially deemed eligible for funding (prior to SEP evaluation), only 9 included an alternative RI. This gap added complexity to the logistical evaluation process, as evaluators often had to reach out directly to RI operators to assess the feasibility of implementing the work plan with a substitute infrastructure during the evaluation stage.

6. Appendices

6.1. OEP: Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Declaration Form

Role of the Operational Expert Panel

The Operational Expert Panel (OEP) is responsible for conducting a logistical feasibility review of proposals submitted to AQUARIUS. This review ensures that proposed projects can be practically implemented within the available infrastructure, timelines, and resources. The OEP evaluates the operational aspects of each proposal, identifying potential challenges and assessing whether the work plan is realistic and achievable.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

As a member of the Operational Expert Panel, you are required to declare any conflicts of interest that may affect your impartiality in assessing applications. Specifically:

- **Publication and Collaboration:** Recuse yourself from assessing an application if you have published together with the applicant or their co-workers within the past five years.
- **Current Cooperation:** Recuse yourself if you are currently collaborating with the applicant or their co-workers.
- **Professional Dependencies:** Recuse yourself if professional dependencies exist between you and the applicant or their co-workers.
- **Indirect Interests:** If you have any other potential indirect interests, promptly notify the AQUARIUS Call Management Office at aquarius.eu@awi.de.

Additionally, if any conflicts of interest arise during the assessment process due to personal, professional, or financial connections with the applicants or their affiliated institutions, you must immediately inform the AQUARIUS Call Management Office.

Your conflict-of-interest declaration will be handled with strict confidentiality and will be used solely by the AQUARIUS Call Management Office. It will not be disclosed elsewhere. Regular scientific interactions, such as those at conferences, workshops, or professional activities, do not need to be declared.

By proceeding with the assessment, you confirm that you have no conflict of interest regarding the application under evaluation. If you identify a conflict, please notify the AQUARIUS Call Management Office and recuse yourself from the assessment process.

Confidentiality Declaration

As part of your role in evaluating AQUARIUS applications, you must agree to the following confidentiality terms:

1. **Non-Disclosure:** Treat all information contained in the applications—including data, methodologies, project descriptions, and applicant details—as strictly confidential. You are prohibited from disclosing or sharing this information with any third party unless explicitly authorised by the AQUARIUS coordinator.
2. **Use of Information:** Use the information obtained through the review process solely for the purpose of evaluating the applications. Under no circumstances may this information be used for personal, commercial, or any other purposes.

By proceeding with the evaluation, you agree to abide by these confidentiality requirements.