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Performance evaluation: satisfaction survey of the call for proposals

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1 Introduction

Eurofleets+ Work Package 4 is dedicated to Calls for proposals requesting the use of research vessels and marine equipment offered within the Eurofleets+ project. This work package is involved in preparation of the Eurofleets+ Access programmes, call dissemination, launching of the calls, the proposal evaluation handling, the selection procedures and post-cruise project evaluation.

In order to better meet the actual need for Transnational Access (TNA) and for similar calls like the Eurofleets+ Ship-time and Marine Equipment Application (SEA) Programmes ("Oceans" and "Regional") and Co-Principal Investigator Call in the future, the Principal Investigators (PIs) of the SEA Programmes and the Co-Principal Investigators (Co-PIs) were asked to participate in the Eurofleets+ satisfaction survey of the call programmes.

This deliverable is dedicated to the evaluation of the satisfaction surveys which were carried out to better understand the applicants' satisfaction with the Eurofleets+ calls for proposals and management of applications.

The SEA Programme Call "Oceans" gave access to 14 Research Vessels (RVs) in the North Atlantic Ocean, North-West/West Atlantic, Arctic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea/Atlantic Ocean and Pacific Ocean. Also, access was given to 10 pieces of Marine Equipment, either together with a Eurofleets+ cruise or on board a non-Eurofleets+ cruise. The SEA Programme Call "Regional" provided access to 16 research vessels and 6 pieces of marine equipment in the North Atlantic Ocean, North-West/West Atlantic, Baltic Sea, North Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Atlantic Ocean, Black Sea, Arctic Ocean, Southern and Pacific Ocean. Marine equipment was provided either together with an EUROFLEETS+ cruise or on board a non-Eurofleets+ cruise.

All proposals had to be submitted via the dedicated online proposal submission website. In total 34 proposals were submitted to the SEA Programme Call "OCEANS" and 22 proposals were submitted to the SEA Programme call "REGIONAL". All submitted applications passed the eligibility criteria. The proposals were evaluated by the Scientific Liaison Panel established by the Eurofleets+ project using the following criteria: (i) scientific and technical quality of the proposal, (ii) quality of work program, (iii) scientific qualification/track record of PI, (iv) technical capability, (v) international collaboration, and (vi) training and public outreach. After scientific evaluation, the Operational Liaison Panel examined each of the selected proposals for logistical feasibility. As a result, 10 research projects of the Eurofleets+ SEA Programme call "OCEANS" were selected for funding, making a success rate of 29,4%. Within the SEA Programme call "REGIONAL", 12 research projects were selected for funding, making a success rate of 55%. The present survey approached all applicants of the SEA Programme calls, being successful or not.

The Co-Principal Investigator (Co-PI) Programme was specifically aimed at early career researchers or researchers with no experience in leading a research cruise, to implement their own research together with experienced scientists in Eurofleets+ scheduled cruises. Applicants to the Co-PI programme could apply for all 27 state-of-the-art research vessels (RVs) (13 Global/Ocean and 14 Regional) offered within Eurofleets+. If applicable, marine equipment may be utilised if scheduled for a main cruise on an Eurofleets+ vessel. The programme provides the successful applicant with one to three days (maximum) of access to a research vessel and marine equipment.

The application procedure for the Co-PI programme, i.e. the scientific and financial description of the project, is shortened to accommodate the requirements of a shorter cruise and research programme,

as well as the early career stage of the applicants in the Co-PI programme. The evaluation procedures for the Co-PI programme is simplified compared to the SEA programme evaluation. The aim was to shorten the time for the proposal evaluation, since Co-PI projects are shorter as such, request fewer funding as the SEA projects and are to be integrated into already scheduled cruises.

2 The objectives and the design of the surveys

2.1 Main objectives

The main aim of the surveys was to get feedback from the applicants on strong and weak points of the application procedure, including dissemination of the calls, information availability, submission and evaluation process, information about the outcomes, and support from the Eurofleets+ office. The gathered information is used to improve the application system to meet the needs of potential applicants in the future.

The applicants could apply for ship-time access in the frames of the following programmes:

- SEA Programme Call "Oceans"
- SEA Programme Call "Regional"
- Co-PI (Co-Principal Investigator)
- RTA (Remote Transnational Access)

While the first survey aimed to involve the applicants in whatever call they were participating in, the second call specifically targeted the Co-PI applicants to reflect better the satisfaction of the younger generation of marine scientists with the Eurofleets+ program.

2.2 Survey design

The satisfaction survey for the applicants of the ship time calls was designed to collect detailed information about the status of the respondents, with questions related to dissemination of the ship time calls, availability and clarity of information about the call details and requirements, and a support for proposal preparation.

Radio button style questions, allowing for a single answer, were used for some of questions. The radio button questions offered five fixed answer options: two positive, one neutral, and two negatives, e.g. strongly agree/agree/neither agree nor disagree/disagree/strongly disagree.

Both surveys were designed to first ascertain the level of experience of the applicants and whether they had submitted proposals for ship times in the past. The applicants were asked how they obtained information about the call opening (multiple choice question), if the information about the call was distributed widely enough and if it was distributed early enough in advance to allow sufficient time for the proposal preparation.

The most comprehensive part of the survey focused on questions related to:

- The application procedure, whether the online proposal submission was easy;
- The layout was clear and if all necessary information was provided;
- Eligibility criteria were appropriate;
- A proposal template was well explained in the provided documentation and it was clear what information is requested and to which level of detail;

The survey concluded with a question addressing the applicants' overall opinion of the call procedure and suggestions for improvements.

In the satisfaction survey for the SEA programme, the applicants had to answer 21 questions (see Annex 5.1) and in the Co-PI survey, 17 questions (see Annex 5.2). For the Co-PI survey the questionnaire was slightly modified, considering the applicants were young researchers.

Google Forms was used to conduct the two surveys (SEA & Co-PI programme) online. A website link of the survey was sent out via email to all the applicants. The period for answering the survey was from 15th of June to 31st of July 2021 (SEA programme survey) and from 2nd of February to 4th of March 2022 (Co-PI survey).

To the SEA Programme Call "Oceans", thirty-four (34) proposals were submitted and to the SEA Programme call "Regional", twenty-two (22) proposals were submitted. From both calls, total 32% of the applicants answered to the SEA Programme satisfaction survey of the call for proposals.

To the Co-PI programme, 10 proposals were submitted, of which 30% of the applicants responded to the satisfaction survey.

3 Results of the surveys

3.1   Results of the SEA programme survey

The majority of the applicants had more than 9 years since their PhD (12 responses). The rest of the applicants had 3<9 years after PhD (4 responses) and 1<3 years after their PhD (2 responses).

Most of the applicants are permanently employed at their institute (13 responses) and with the reminder (5 responses) stating that they are not.

Ten out of eighteen applicants had submitted the proposal to the SEA programme "Regional", 7 of the applicants had submitted a proposal to the SEA programme "Oceans" and one applicant had submitted a proposal to the CO-PI programme.

The information about the Eurofleets+ calls for ship-time was obtained from various sources. One-third of the applicants received the information about the Eurofleets+ calls from the EF+ website and one third from their colleagues (see fig. 1).
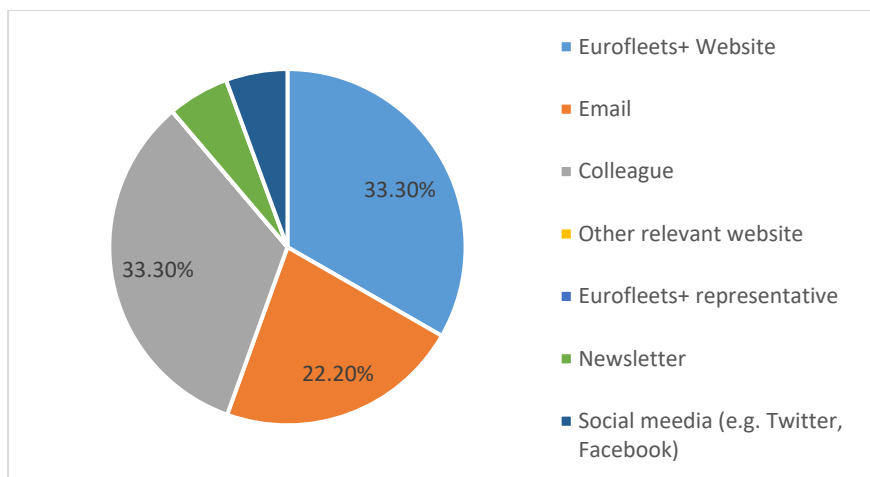

Figure 1 Showing the sources from which the applicants retrieved their ship-call information.

The applicants were asked about how many proposals on ship-time (nationally and internationally) had they submitted before submitting a proposal to the Eurofleets+ calls. Three (3) applicants had not submitted proposals before, 7 applicants had submitted between 1<3 proposals, 4 applicants had submitted between 3<9 proposals and finally 4 applicants had submitted more than 9 proposals before submitting a proposal to the Eurofleets+ calls.

Based on the feedback, most of respondents found that the information presented on the Eurofleets+ website was excellent (7-9 persons) or good (7-8 persons) (see fig. 2).
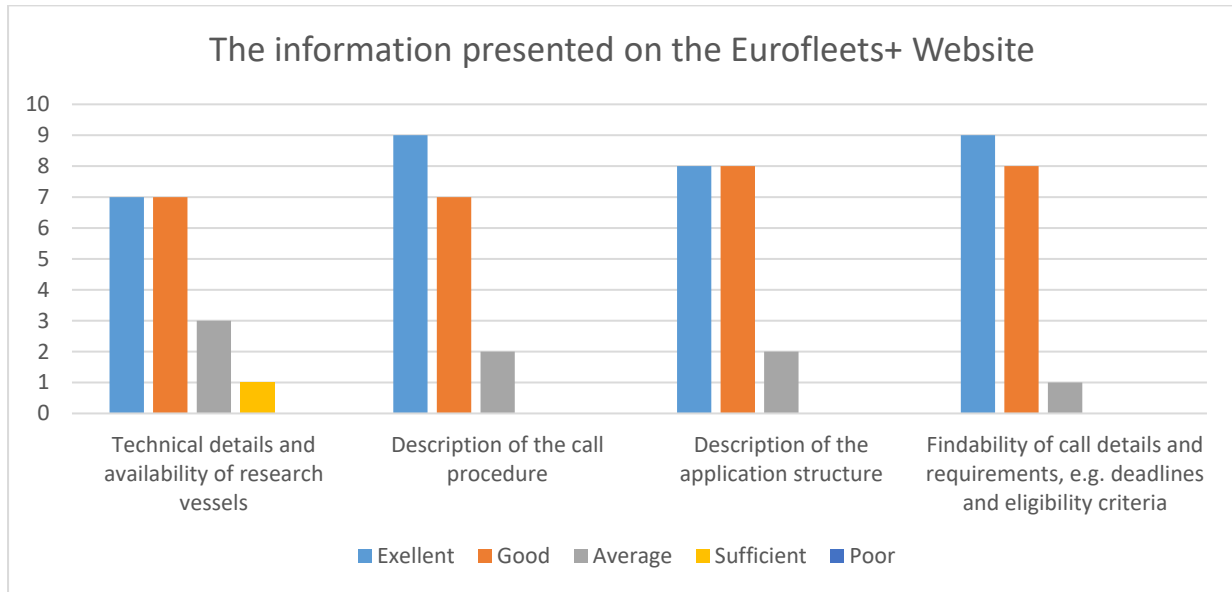

Figure 2. Information presented on Eurofleets+ website based on the applicants' feedback.

The question about whether the eligibility criteria were appropriate, 12 applicants answered positively, 5 applicants said it was easy to meet and 1 applicant answered that it was too difficult.

All applicants were satisfied with the Eurofleets+ Online Proposal Submission website (see fig. 3). There were 4 criteria that the applicant had to evaluate and give their assessment whether they strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree.
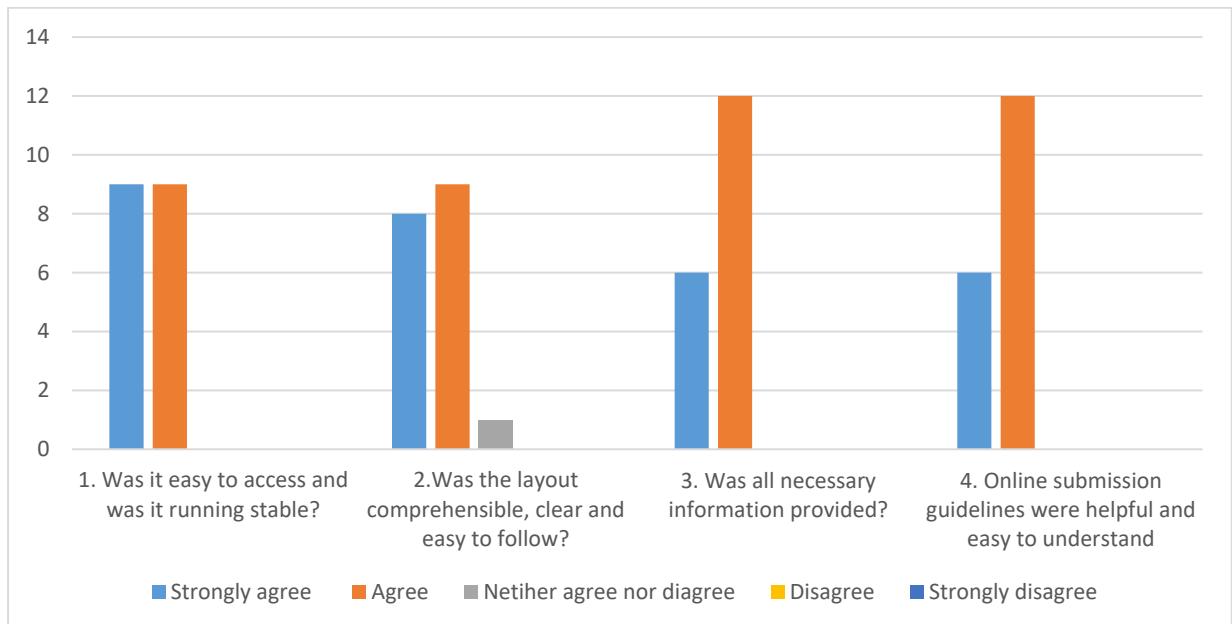

Figure 3. The applicant's satisfaction of the Eurofleets+ Online Proposal Submission Website.

The applicants were given an option to describe whether there was any information missing in the access details and requirements. The answers are given below:

- Information on available budgets or volumes of funding were missing. Offer to fund a fraction of quoted logistic costs was a negative surprise.
- If the ships can operate correctly with the different types of ROV/AUV.
- More information on distribution of ship time among different institutions would need.
- I submitted the proposal in September 2019 and can't really remember all the details.

The applicants were asked whether the information about the call opening was distributed early enough in advance to assure sufficient time for the proposal preparation. While most of respondents answered yes(12 responses), 6 applicants gave a more elaborated answer. The answers are given below:

- I noticed a bit too late that the call was open for OCEANS (where I requested the ship time), and had enough time for REGIONAL (where I wanted to request the AUV). I received the feedback of my rejected OCEANS proposal with about 1 week of time to delete my request of AUV in REGIONAL and transform it into a RV+ME proposal, which was successful.
- Not so much.
- YES. We discovered the call was open well in advance.
- Yes, it was enough.
- Yes, I had enough time to prepare the proposal.
- yes, but as always, the earlier the better.

For the proposal template the question inquired whether the template was adequately explained in the provided call documentation, if it was clear what information was requested and to the level of detail required. While 15 answered it was well explained, 3 respondents gave a more detailed response:

- Filling an online form is slightly confusing, uploading a document (maybe a template could be provided) would be probably easier, but overall it was ok.
- I think so, but I can't really remember since the proposal was submitted in November 2019.
- The proposal is quite clear and overall similar to other Eurofleets+ proposals.

Almost all the applicants (17) found the requested length of the proposal to be adequate, while 1 found it not to be.

From the survey results it emerged that respondents found the Data Management Plan (DMP the most challenging part of the proposal. The applicants gave elaborated comments on DMP:

- It was unclear what it is expected from the PI, or what are the differences between the preliminary and final plan. There are data centres to choose, but one does not know why should be one chose over others.
- The Data Management Plan was (by far) the most confusing part. I was very grateful of the webinar, but still I felt quite lost.
- Difficult to follow if other data than the standard ones (e.g. CTD) are acquired.
- In both my proposal there were problems with the DMP.
- The DMP was the most difficult part of the application to fill, since I'm not very familiar with the DM processes and jargon.
- The Data Management Plan is long, and partially difficult to understand.
- Maybe, more explanation would be better.
- Details for seismic data are not clear.

- The DMP was somehow difficult to develop.
- It could be better explained, may be with examples?

Eleven out of eighteen applicants agreed that the contact with the Eurofleets+ evaluation and project offices was easy and helpful. Some comments made by the applicants:

- Everyone was very helpful with my general and specific questions.
- A fixed deadline informing on confirmation, denial, or paused would be helpful.
- Maybe the support could be faster in the contact times.
- Timeline information for decision process was missing.
- Very good support team.

In general, the Eurofleets+ application and evaluation procedure were evaluated as excellent (6 answers) or good (7 answers) in comparison to the experiences on a national level (i.e. similarities/differences, pool of RVs and equipment on offer, transparency of the evaluation procedure, etc.) (see fig. 4).
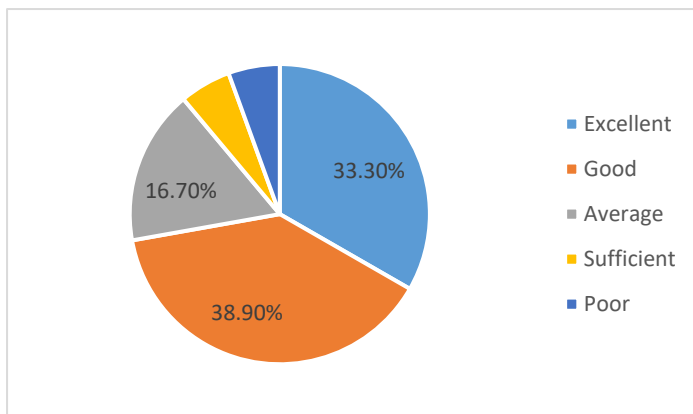

Figure 4. The results of comparing Eurofleets+ application and evaluation procedure with the experience on national level.

In addition, were given some responses about the Eurofleets+ calls for ship-time:

- The length of the project (14-16 pages) makes it very feasible for early career scientists.
- Almost the only chance for short, small scale projects and initial research prior to large campaigns.
- Simplicity of the application.
- The only chance for short-term and small projects.
- Many vessels are available,
- The length and structure of the proposal.

For the future references the applicants gave comments on what Eurofleets+ needs to improve for upcoming calls:

- Calls should be provided on a regular basis.
- Transparency: The information why one proposal has been chosen over another should be made public. Accessibility: Preference should be clearly given to scientists who do not have access to marine infrastructure.
- Available ship times are very short.
- It was difficult to know if the vessel I was applying to was available.
- Calls to be done more often, and possibly with longer ship times.

- A list of possible partners to build a network.
- Timeline for evaluation and decision process.
- Ensure there is enough funding available to bring equipment to the vessels.
- The DMP was somehow difficult to develop.

Most of the applicants would participate in similar international calls in the future, both for global and regional vessels (see fig. 5). For the preferred frequency for calls, most answered annual (9 responses) and the rest answered bi-annual (8 responses) (see fig. 6).
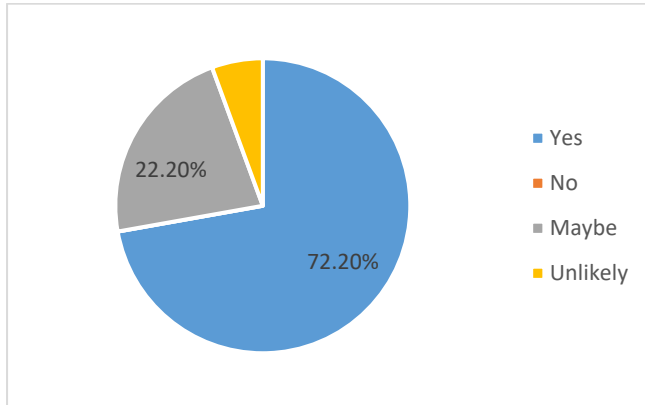

Figure 5. Results showing whether the applicants plan to submit a proposal for future Eurofleets+ calls for ship-time.
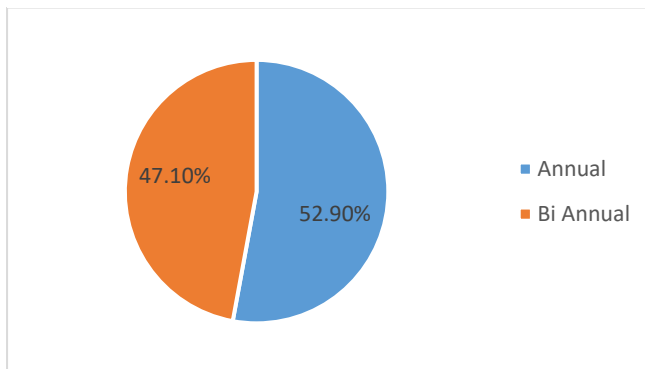

Figure 6. The preferred frequency for calls of ship-time.

Below are given the benefits/arguments by the applicants why they prefer participating in Eurofleets+ calls:

- Obtaining research funding and ship time is usually simultaneous in the US, which makes things easier. However, sometimes having ship time in hand facilitates research funding.
- International collaboration, access to equipment not (easily) available in national calls.
- Almost the only chance for short, small scale projects and initial research prior to large campaigns.
- Preference given to scientists who do not have access to marine infrastructure.
- In the last call, The Tyrrhenian Sea has been completely forgotten, the request was extremely difficult, especially in logistical terms it takes too many days for the transfer ship, and it is not known whether the relay with other missions is being considered.

- Being based on a Portuguese research centre, this is pretty much the only option to have access to ship time to conduct our deep-sea research agenda.
- In Italy we have a chronic lack of suitable Research Vessels, so at the moment this appears the only way to me to continue doing high-level research.
- The availability of update equipment for geophysics and sampling.
- The only chance for short-term and small projects.
- Incentive for international collaboration. Bring together different science infrastructure to do new science. Therefore, I feel it is important to also have funding for the shipping costs of equipment as this might be the restriction.
- Increased access to RVs and LEXIs.
- A great diversity of ships and platforms.

In the presence of a permanent program, applicants would prefer calls by geographical region and calls by vessel size/capability (see fig. 7).
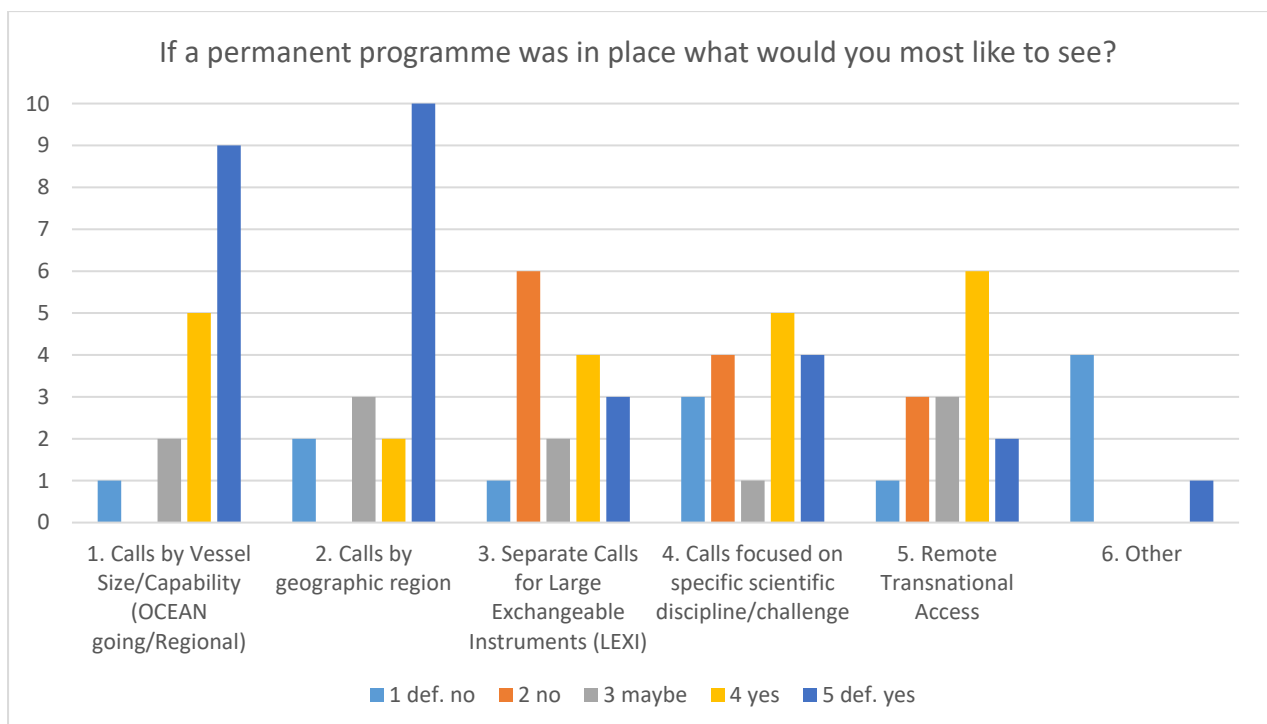

Figure 7. The preferred permanent program for future ship-time calls by applicants.

The final comments made by two of the applicants were.

- Often the insertion of students and doctoral students is asked, but at the time of submission we do not know if those names we give will still be available in two years. There is a lot of focus on the transmission of knowledge via social media, but no official channels are indicated that Eurofleets itself should deal with.
- Synoptic scale measurement campaign with different vessels and robotic systems collaborating to get a basin scale spatial snapshot

3.2 Results of the Co-PI survey

The applicants had research experience between 3-9 years after PhD and two of the respondents are permanent employees at their research institute/company. The information about the Eurofleets+ call for Co-PI proposals was received via social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) by two of the applicants and one got the information from a colleague.

For all the applicants it was their first time to write a proposal on ship-time. They found the information presented on the Eurofleets+ website represented rather good (see fig. 8).
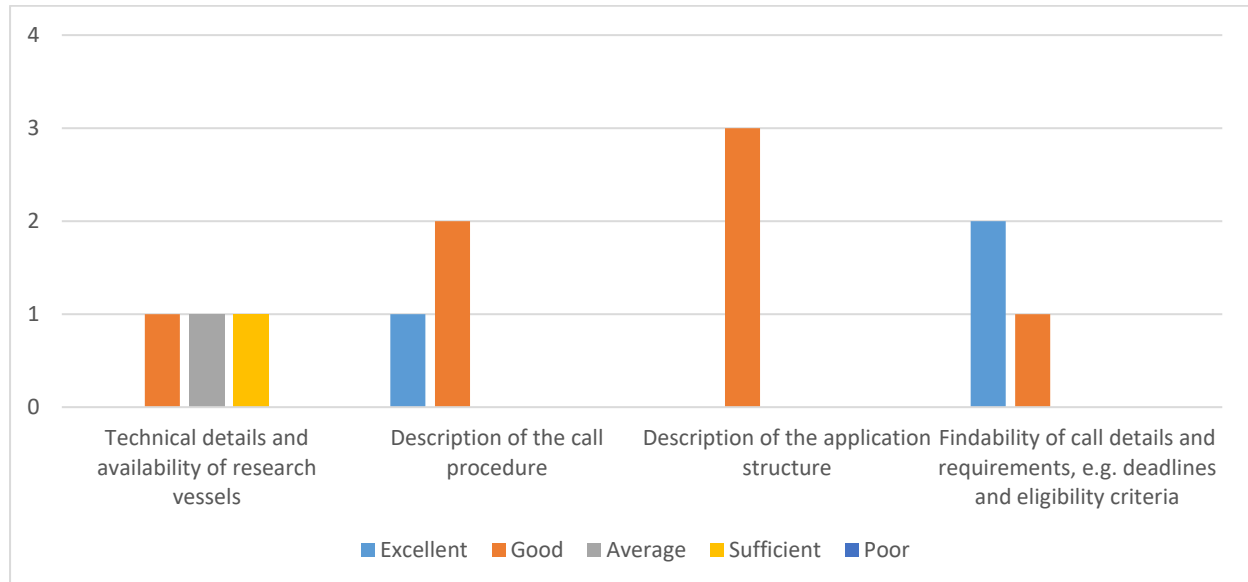

Figure 6. Assessment by the applicants about the information presented on the Eurofleets+ website.

Two out of three applicants found the eligibility criteria to be appropriate and easy to meet. All of them found the Eurofleets+ online proposal submission website easy to access, with a clear and comprehensible layout and all the necessary information provided. One applicant found the online submission guidelines not very helpful nor easy to understand (see fig. 9).
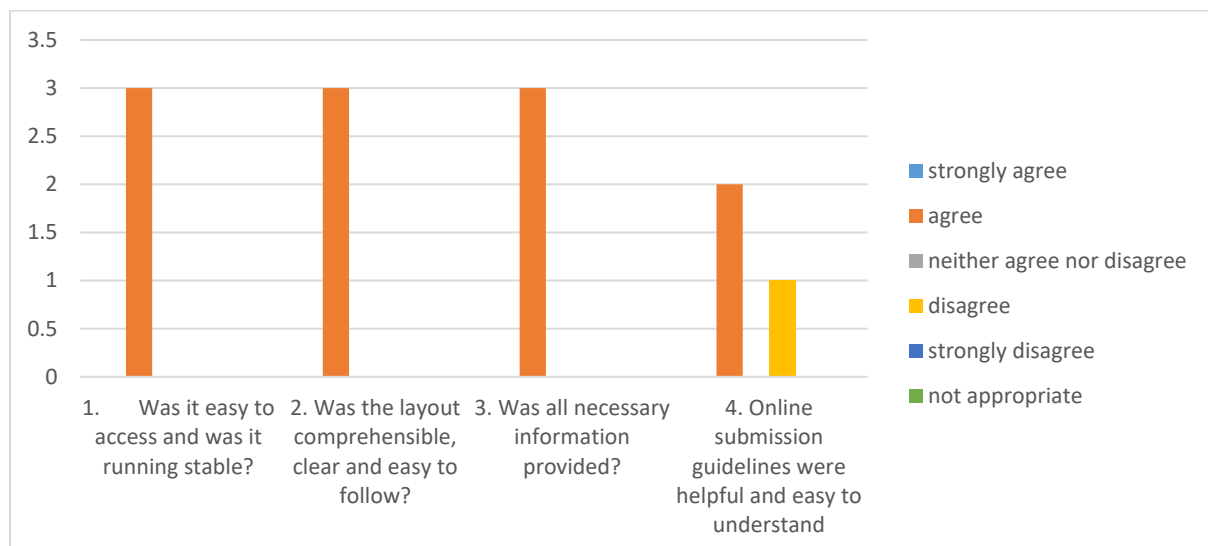

Figure 9. Satisfaction of the applicants with the Eurofleets+ Online proposal Submission website

While two applicants agreed that the information on the potential vessels/cruises was clear and available early enough in advance to assure sufficient time for the proposal preparation, one of the applicants had difficulties calculating shipboard time based on website and the information about the port calls (time and place) was incomplete and vague dates + ports were only shown on map.

All applicants agreed that the proposal template was well explained in the provided call documentation, also it was clear what information was requested and to which level of detail, in addition the requested length of the proposal was adequate.

As with the Oceans/Regional calls the applicants found that Data Management Plan (DMP) the most confusing element of the application process.

One of the applicants did not understand the purpose of the DMP, nor what information to provide that could convince reviewers or administrators of the quality/feasibility of the proposed science. Also, one applicant answered that they understood the requirements more or less.

Two applicants agreed that the contact with the Eurofleets+ evaluation and project offices were easy and helpful and the questions were answered clearly and timely.

One of the applicants found the Eurofleets+ call for Co-PI proposals to be a great opportunity and another one said there was a low threshold for early career researchers.

For future to improve the upcoming calls, the applicant's suggested that:

- Feedback on the proposal in a timely manner. I had to chase the outcome of the proposal after not hearing back for a number of months.
- Contact details of the main PI's of the scheduled expeditions.

All applicants said they would submit a proposal in the future if similar Eurofleets+ calls for ship-time would be arranged. The preferred frequency of the calls would be annually.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, two satisfaction surveys were conducted, one for the SEA Programme and one for the CO-PI programme. It is clear from the surveys that the Eurofleets+ program is a great opportunity for marine scientists, especially younger scientists and early career researchers. It is made successful by the simplicity of the application and by the length and structure of the proposal. For young scientists, this kind of program is almost the only chance for short, small scale projects and initial research prior to large scale campaigns. The length of the project makes it feasible for early-career scientists, particularly with the accessibility of various vessels.

The survey results show that the calls were announced early enough in advance, giving sufficient time for the proposal preparation. The majority of the respondents found the length of the proposal to be adequate and the eligibility criteria appropriate or easy to meet. Most of the applicants strongly agreed that the support from the project and evaluation offices was highly appreciated.

The most confusing part for the applicants was the Data Management Plan. It was said that it was unclear what is expected from the PI or what are the differences between the preliminary and final plan.

The following valuable recommendations for the future calls were given by the applicants:

- Calls for ship-time should be provided on a regular basis, if possible, more often and potentially with longer ship times.
- Increase the transparency by making the information available why one proposal has been chosen over another.
- Preference should be given to scientists who do not have access to marine infrastructure.
- A clearer timeline for evaluation and decision process.
- More detailed information was requested on available budget, available ships for a specific region and period, etc.
- To better explain the Data Management Plan, maybe provide the applicants with an example.

In summary, the satisfaction survey gave valuable information about the proposal preparation and submission processes. This information could be used for improved planning in future calls. For future ship-time calls, it is suggested to perform the survey within a short time after the closing of a call in order to increase participation in the survey and to get relevant feedback while the impression of the call procedure could still be remembered.

A common recommendation from the surveys is that marine scientists very much hope to have similar calls arranged in the future.

5 Annexes

5.1 Eurofleets+ Performance evaluation: Satisfaction survey of the call for PI proposals

5.2 Eurofleets+ Performance evaluation: Satisfaction survey of the call for Co-PI proposals

5.1 Eurofleets+ Performance evaluation: Satisfaction survey of the call for PI proposals

Q1. What is your level of research experience? (>9 years after PhD; 3<9 years after PhD; 1<3 years after their PhD)

Q2. Are you a permanent employee at your research institution/company? (yes, no)

Q3. To which Eurofleets+ call have you submitted a proposal? (SEA-Call "OCEAN", SEA-Call "REGIONAL", Co-PI, RTA)

Q4. How did you receive information about the Eurofleets+ calls for ship-time? (Eurofleets+ Website; Colleague; E-mail; Newsletter; Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook))

Q5. How many proposals on ship-time (nationally and internationally) have you submitted before submitting a proposal to the Eurofleets+ calls? (0; 1<3; 3<9; >9)

Q6. How was the information presented on the Eurofleets+ Website? (Excellent, good, average, sufficient, poor)

1. Technical details and availability of research vessels
2. Description of the call procedure
3. Description of the application structure
4. Findability of call details and requirements, e.g. deadlines and eligibility criteria

Q7. Were the eligibility criteria appropriate? (easy to meet; appropriate; too difficult to meet)

Q8. How satisfied are you with the Eurofleets+ Online Proposal Submission website? (strongly agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; strongly disagree; not appropriate)

1. Was it easy to access and was it running stable?
2. Was the layout comprehensible, clear and easy to follow?
3. Was all necessary information provided?
4. Online submission guidelines were helpful and easy to understand

Q9. Which information was missing in the access details and requirements? Any other comments on the call details? (optional)

Q10. Was the information about the call opening distributed early enough in advance to assure sufficient time for the proposal preparation?

Q11. Was the proposal template well explained in the provided call documentation, was it clear what information is requested and to which level of detail?

Detailed comments on proposal template (optional)

Q12. Was the requested length of the proposal adequate? (yes; no)

Q13. Were the requirements for the Data Management Plan clearly described? Were the guidelines easy to understand?

Q14. Was the contact with the Eurofleets+ evaluation and project offices easy and helpful? Were questions answered clearly and timely? (strongly agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; strongly disagree; not applicable)

Detailed comments on the support from the Eurofleets+ evaluation and project offices.

Q15. How would you evaluate the Eurofleets+ application and evaluation procedure in comparison to your experiences on a national level (i.e. similarities/differences, pool of RVs and equipment on offer, transparency of the evaluation procedure, etc.)? (excellent; good; average; sufficient; poor)

Q16. Is there anything you specially liked about the Eurofleets+ calls for ship-time?

Q17. Is there anything that a transnational access project like Eurofleets+ needs to improve for future calls?

Q18. If Eurofleets+ calls for ship-time will be arranged in the future, would you submit a proposal? (yes; no; maybe; unlikely)

Q19. If calls for ship-time are arranged nationally and internationally (Eurofleets), what would be the benefits/arguments for you to participate in Eurofleets calls?

Q20. What would be the preferred frequency for calls? (biannual; annual)

Q21. If a permanent programme was in place what would you most like to see? (where 1 is def. no and 5 is def. yes)

1. Calls by Vessel Size/Capability (OCEAN going/Regional)
2. Calls by geographic region
3. Separate Calls for Large Exchangeable Instruments (LEXI)
4. Calls focused on specific scientific discipline/challenge
5. Remote Transnational Access
6. Other

If you answered 'Other' in Q21 please write down your suggestion here.

5.2 Eurofleets+ Performance evaluation: Satisfaction survey of the call for Co-PI proposals

Q1. What is your level of research experience? (>9 years after PhD; 3<9 years after PhD; 1<3 years after their PhD)

Q2. Are you a permanent employee at your research institution/company? (yes, no)

Q3. How did you receive information about the Eurofleets+ call for Co-PI proposals? (Eurofleets+ Website; Colleague; E-mail; Newsletter; Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook))

Q4. Was it your first proposal on ship-time? (yes, no)

Q5. How was the information presented on the Eurofleets+ Website? (Excellent, good, average, sufficient, poor)

5. Technical details and availability of research vessels
6. Description of the call procedure
7. Description of the application structure
8. Findability of call details and requirements, e.g. timeline and eligibility criteria

Q6. Were the eligibility criteria appropriate? (easy to meet; appropriate; too difficult to meet)

Q7. How satisfied are you with the Eurofleets+ Online Proposal Submission website? (strongly agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; strongly disagree; not appropriate)

5. Was it easy to access and was it running stable?
6. Was the layout comprehensible, clear and easy to follow?
7. Was all necessary information provided?
8. Online submission guidelines were helpful and easy to understand

Q8. Which information was missing in the access details and requirements? Any other comments on the call details? (optional)

Q9. Was the information about the potential vessels/cruises clear and available early enough in advance to assure sufficient time for the proposal preparation?

Q10. Was the proposal template well explained in the provided call documentation, was it clear what information is requested and to which level of detail?

Q11. Was the requested length of the proposal adequate? (yes, no)

Q12. Were the requirements for the Data Management Plan clearly described? Were the guidelines easy to understand?

Q13. Was the contact with the Eurofleets+ evaluation and project offices easy and helpful? Were questions answered clearly and timely? (strongly agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; strongly disagree; not applicable)

Q14. Is there anything you specially liked about the Eurofleets+ call for Co-PI proposals?

Q15. Is there anything that a similar call for Co-PI proposals needs to improve for future calls?

Q16. If similar Eurofleets+ calls will be arranged in the future, would you submit a proposal? (yes; no; maybe; unlikely)

Q17. What would be the preferred frequency for calls? (biannual; annual)