



POLARIN

POLAR
RESEARCH
INFRASTRUCTURE
NETWORK

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Selection report of the first call for proposals

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1 SUMMARY

The POLARIN project aims to address key scientific challenges in the polar regions by providing free Transnational Access (TA) to a wide range of high-level research infrastructures. The first POLARIN TA call, launched in October 2024, offered access to 49 infrastructures in both the Arctic and Antarctic, including research stations, vessels, and core repositories. A total of 96 proposals were submitted, of which 86 met the eligibility criteria. The evaluation process, coordinated by the POLARIN Scientific Evaluation Secretariat, included external expert reviews, scientific evaluation and access recommendations by the Scientific Liaison Panel, and logistical assessment and access decisions by infrastructure operators to ensure both scientific excellence and feasibility. Following a rigorous and transparent review process, 37 projects were selected for funding, with strong participation from early-career researchers and institutions from countries without national polar research infrastructure. This outcome reinforces POLARIN's mission to promote international collaboration, optimize the use of research facilities, and advance scientific understanding of the rapidly changing polar regions.

2 Introduction

The main goal of POLARIN is to address the scientific challenges of polar regions by providing integrated free of charge Transnational Access (TA) to a wide array of high-level Research Infrastructures (RIs) for selected user groups. The first TA call for proposals was opened at the very beginning of October 2024 (Month 8 of the POLARIN project lifetime), offering TA to 49 RIs.

Proposals requesting POLARIN TA were submitted through a unique entry point ([POLARIN TAP](#)) used in POLARIN to manage the whole TA process. The scientific evaluation was managed by the POLARIN Scientific Evaluation Secretariat, with the support of a Scientific Liaison Panel (SLP), a panel comprised of internationally recognised experts in polar research, and with good understanding of fieldwork practices, less than 50% from POLARIN institutions. Each proposal was assigned with a Watchdog from the SLP, which oversaw the evaluation process of the proposal. Proposals were evaluated by external experts selected by the Secretariat (about 2.2 experts per each proposal in average). At a later stage of the evaluation process, the SLP convened for the Consensus Meetings organized by videoconference to discuss the proposals, the external evaluations and the watchdog statements to scientifically recommend proposals for access. The scientific evaluation of submitted proposals was followed by the logistic evaluation and access decisions performed by the RI operators with the advice of the Infrastructure Operators Forum (IOF), a forum that includes all RI operators of the project consortium.

3 Contributors to the evaluation process

3.1 POLARIN Scientific Evaluation Secretariat

The **POLARIN Scientific Evaluation Secretariat**, established under WP1 – Enabling science for understanding and predicting key processes in polar regions, is responsible for coordinating and administering the scientific evaluation of proposals submitted via the POLARIN Transnational Access Platform (TAP). In close collaboration with WP2 (TA Proposal Management Service) and the Scientific Liaison Panel (SLP), the Secretariat ensures that the evaluation process is conducted in a fair, transparent, and consistent manner, following the principles and criteria defined within the project. The Secretariat is hosted by the *Istituto Nazionale di Oceanografia e di Geofisica Sperimentale – OGS* in Trieste (Italy) and is composed of Michele Rebesco and Matilde Ferrante.

3.2 POLARIN Scientific Liaison Panel

The **POLARIN Scientific Liaison Panel (SLP)** was responsible for the scientific evaluation of the TA proposals. It was comprised of internationally recognised experts in polar research, and with good understanding of fieldwork practices, less than 50% from POLARIN institutions. The SLP, whose membership is personal and public, was nominated in November 2024 and included 21 experts:

43% of SLP members were affiliated with institutions in the POLARIN consortium:

- Sydonia Bret-Harte*, University of Alaska Fairbanks, US
- Florence Colleoni, OGS, IT
- Matthias Forwick, University Tromsø, NO
- Kimmo Kahilainen, University of Helsinki, FI
- Zoe Koenig, University Tromsø, NO
- Timothy Lane, Aarhus University, DK
- Katrine Raundrup, Greenland Institute of Natural Resources, DK
- Pedro Rodrigues, Rif Field Station, IS
- Søren Rysgaard, Aarhus University, DK

57% of the SLP members were not affiliated to institutions in the POLARIN consortium:

- João Canário, University of Lisbon, PT
- Lee Cooper, University of Maryland, US
- Christopher Jones°, NOAA-Fisheries, US
- Kathy Law, CNRS Laboratory for Atmospheres, Observations, and Space, FR
- Runa Magnússon, Wageningen University, NL
- Marc Oliva°, University of Barcelona, ES
- Olga Povoroznyuk°, University of Vienna, AT
- Jean-Baptiste Sallee, CNRS Laboratory of Oceanography and Climate, FR
- Francesca Sangiorgi*, Utrecht University, NL
- Annette Scheepsta, University of Groningen, NL
- Anna Wagner, Engineer Research and Development Center, US
- Manfred Wendisch, Leipzig University, DE

* = Co-chair of the panel

° = resigned during the 1st TA call and will not be part of the SLP in the second call

3.3 Watchdogs

Individual SLP members acted as “watchdogs” for selected proposals nearest to their expertise, accompanying the proposals assigned to them throughout the evaluation process. Generally, each watchdog got assigned about 5 proposals in average. Once the individual experts had completed their evaluations, the watchdog drafted a short statement summarizing the external expert reviews

and providing a suggestion for access recommendation for the SLP members to agree at the Consensus Meeting on the proposals that are recommended for funding.

3.4 External experts

A [call](#) for volunteering as expert to contribute to the scientific evaluation of the POLARIN TA applications was issued in October 2024. Nearly 60 reviewers positively answered to this call (few of them after the call was already closed). About 40% of them, whose expertise matched the proposals submitted, was subsequently invited, thus participating in the review process. The invited experts signed a confidentiality clause and a declaration of no conflict of interest prior to their evaluations. Furthermore, about 200 additional reviewers who participated in the review process were identified by the POLARIN Scientific Evaluation Secretariat using Scopus, the world's leading abstract and citation database. Nearly 1500 e-mail were sent between invitations and reminders to secure these reviewers. In fact, of the over 800 experts contacted (at the turn of Christmas vacations), about 600 declined or never replied and nearly 10% of the experts that accepted to review a TA proposal and registered in TAP did not submit their evaluation within the deadline.

The identification and recruitment of the external evaluators was the most challenging phase of the evaluation process and placed a lot of pressure on the Scientific Evaluation Secretariat, that was nevertheless able to handle this tremendous task successfully.

4 Summary of the evaluation process

The evaluation of proposals consisted of different phases: Eligibility Check, Scientific Evaluation, Logistic Evaluation and Access decision, and Negotiation Phase (Figure 1).

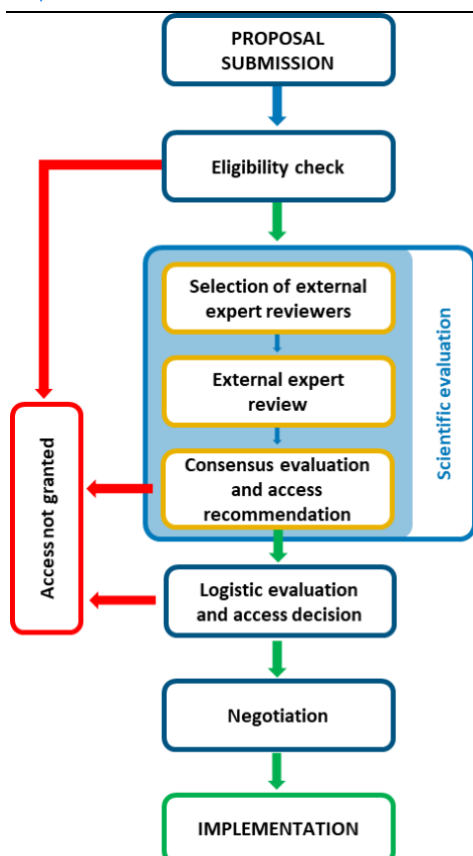


Figure 1: Workflow and different phases involved in the POLARIN evaluation procedure.

4.1 Eligibility check

Proposals submitted through the POLARIN TAP were first checked for eligibility by the POLARIN Project Manager and the TA Coordinator (WP2 lead). The proposal was considered eligible if the application was complete and received on time, followed the requested proposal structure and was complying with the general eligibility criteria described in D1.2 (Report on Procedure for Provision of Transnational Access).

4.2 Designation of Watchdogs and selection of external reviewers

The Scientific Evaluation Secretariat allocated each eligible proposal to a specific SLP member, whose expertise was closest to the respective proposal topic and designated the member as a “watchdog” of that proposal. At the same time, the most suitable external experts that could be identified were invited to evaluate the proposals. As a general rule, proposals were evaluated by at least two external experts.

4.3 External expert review

The external experts (alike the SLP members) were asked to declare in TAP if they had a conflict of interest with the proposals they were asked to revise. In case a conflict of interest was declared at this stage, the experts were excluded for further interaction with that specific proposal. Conflict of interest was defined as: direct financial, professional or personal benefit from the success or failure of the proposal. Moreover, it was considered a conflict if the reviewers had published together with the applicant or the co-workers within the past five years, if they were currently cooperating or if professional dependencies existed, or if they had any other potential indirect interest. Normal scientific interaction, e.g. at conferences, workshops, professional activities etc., did not need to be declared. In addition, the reviewers had to accept the confidentiality condition to treat the invitation, the proposal and their review as confidential and not share the proposal and their review with anyone. The names of the external experts or SLP members assigned to individual proposals were not made public.

All proposals were evaluated using the same criteria. Six main criteria were established (and detailed in the Guidelines for evaluators and in Deliverable D1.3) with different weights for the final evaluation. A score between 0 (poor) and 5 (excellent) was to be provided for each of the six evaluation criteria that included:

1. Background and objectives: Scientific quality of the planned research (final weighting 30%)
2. Scientific and societal impact (final weighting 10%)
3. Quality of the work plan (final weighting 15%)
4. Scientific competence of the user-group leader and user-group (final weighting 15%)
5. Expected results and possible risks (final weighting 15%)
6. Exploitation of results (final weighting 15%)

The maximum possible score per proposal was therefore 50.

4.4 Consensus Evaluation and access recommendation

Once the individual experts had completed their evaluations, the watchdogs drafted a short statement summarizing the external expert reviews and their own opinion, providing a suggestion for access recommendation for the SLP members to agree upon at the Consensus Meetings. Given the

high number of proposals to be discussed, nine separate Consensus Meeting slots were organized to discuss about ten proposals per each meeting. During the Consensus meetings, the watchdogs of the proposals under discussion during that specific meeting and other SLP members convened with the assistance of the POLARIN Scientific Evaluation Secretariat to discuss the external evaluations, the summary statement and the watchdog suggestion. Based on the meetings outcome, all proposals were classified into two categories:

A - Recommended for access and proceeding to logistic evaluation and access decisions by the RI.

B - Not recommended for access and excluded from the logistic evaluation.

An evaluation statement for each proposal was drafted based on the initial watchdog statement and subsequently edited by SLP members and POLARIN Scientific Evaluation Secretariat. Once approved by all SLP members, the evaluation statements were uploaded in TAP and were subsequently shared with the RI operators and applicants.

4.5 Logistic Evaluation

Proposals recommended for access by the SLP were examined by the relevant RI operators to conduct the evaluation of the logistical feasibility of the proposed work, use of equipment, facilities and support needed from the infrastructure, area of operation and timing of access. The POLARIN Infrastructure Operators Forum (IOF) within WP2 convened online in four subgroup meetings to provide consultation and support in the process. The convened RI operators had the possibility to discuss any concerns or questions regarding the project implementation and access decisions.

Once the RI operators had completed the logistic evaluation, they submitted their access decisions on the proposals (access granted or not granted), together with a logistic evaluation statement, to the POLARIN TAP. The access decisions, together with both scientific evaluation statements (done by SLP) and logistic evaluation statements (done by the RIs) were then provided to the proponents in the POLARIN TAP. No information on the evaluation outcome was available to the applicants before the access decision was announced.

5 Evaluation of the first call for proposals

The 1st POLARIN Transnational Access Call for proposals was open from 1st of October to 28th of November 2024 following the planned timeline (Figure 2).

1st TA Call –activities and time schedule

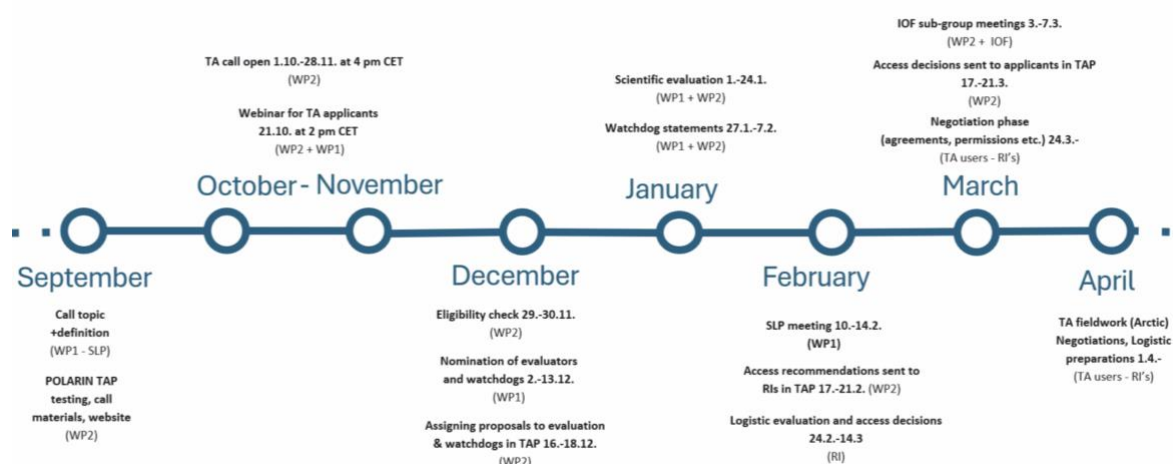


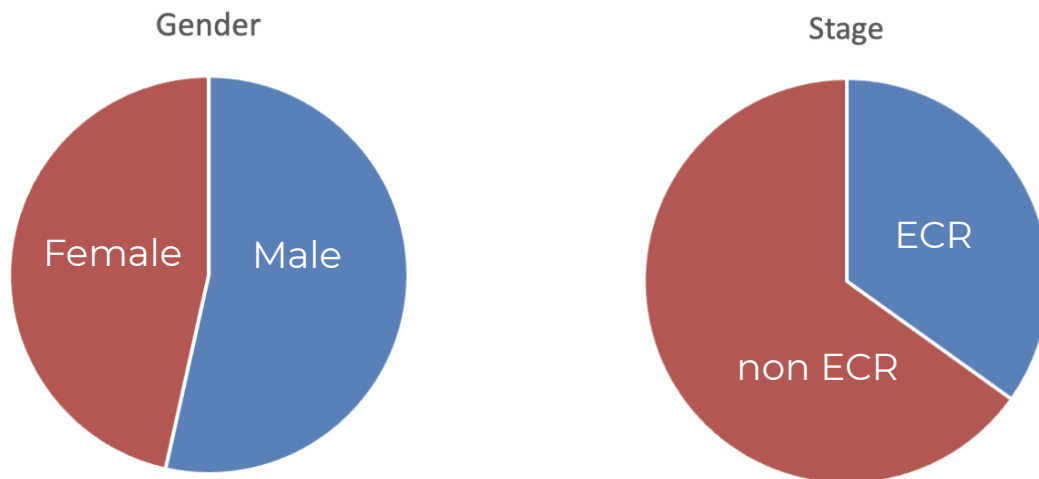
Figure 2: Time schedule of the 1st POLARIN TA call.

Access to 49 Ris was offered in both polar regions: 26 Arctic Stations, 1 Observatory, 10 Antarctic Stations, 10 Polar vessels and platforms and 2 Core Repositories.

Ninety-six proposals were submitted by the deadline, but 10 were considered ineligible during the eligibility check, conducted between 29th of November to 2nd of December 2024, and thus excluded from further evaluation.

Not all the Ris offered were requested by eligible proposals. Of the 49 offered Ris, only 24 Arctic Stations, 9 Antarctic Stations and 8 Polar vessels were requested by eligible proposals. The oceanic observatory FRAM and the Core Repositories were not requested at all in the call.

The characteristics of the User Group Leader of the eligible proposals were quite balanced in terms of gender (Figure 3), career stage (Figure 4) and European versus non-European institute of affiliation (Figure 5). Six proposals were from countries without any national access to polar RIs (Switzerland and Portugal).



Figures 3 and 4: distribution of gender and career stage of the Group Leader.

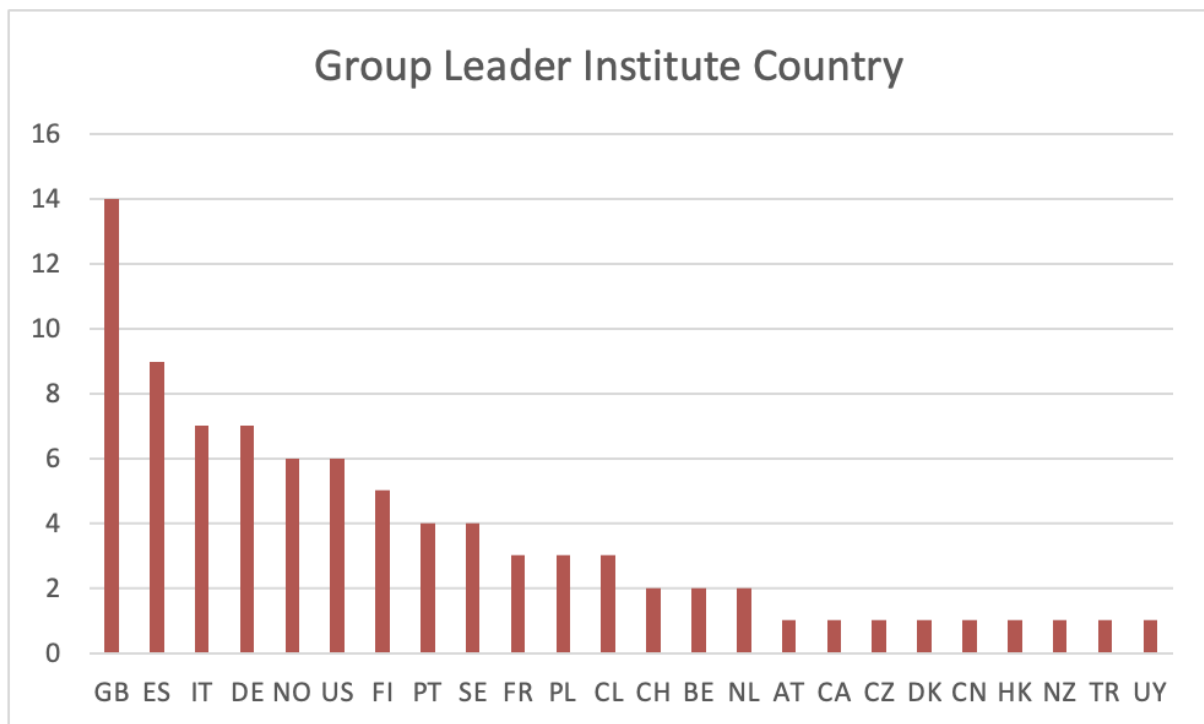


Figure 5: country of the institute of affiliation of the Group Leader.

Of the 86 eligible proposals, 53 requested terrestrial Ris, 29 marine Ris, and 4 were amphibious in term of the setting of the requested infrastructures. In terms of the hemisphere, 61 proposals requested Arctic Ris, 22 Antarctic Ris, and 3 were bipolar in terms of requested Ris (Figure 6).

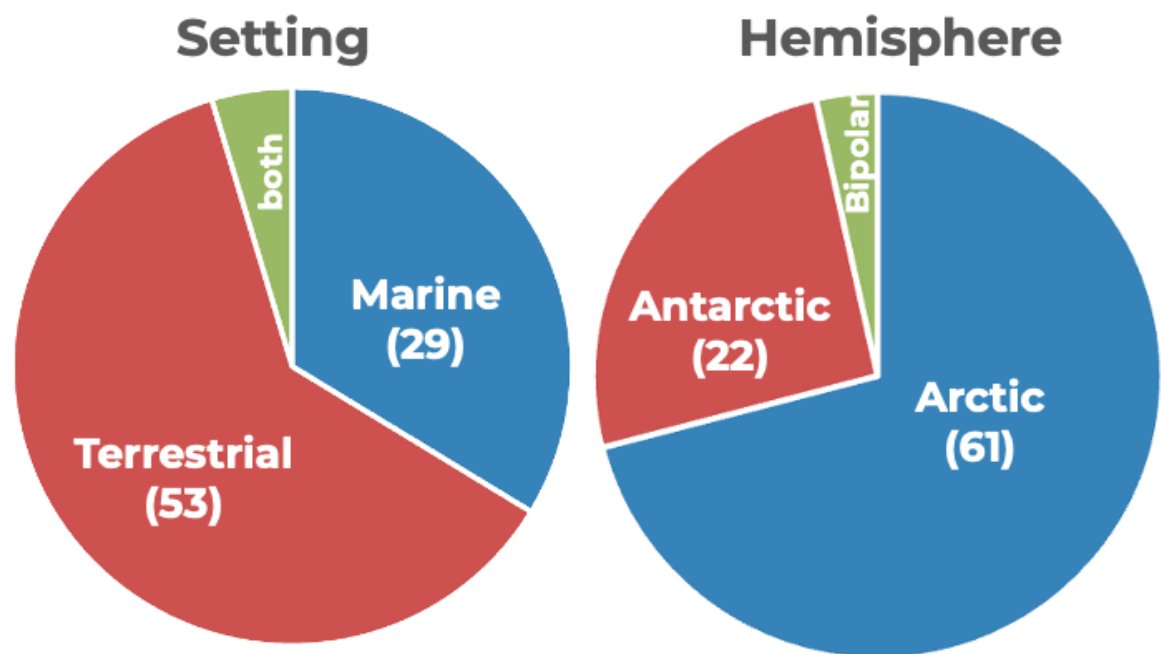


Figure 6. Distribution of the eligible proposals in terms of type of setting and hemisphere.

In terms of number of requested RIS, 75 proposals requested only one RI, 5 requested 2-3 RIs, and 4 proposals requested more than 5 (up to 12) RIs.

In terms of the modality of access, only 4 eligible proposals requested only Remote Access to the RIs, and 5 proposals requested a combination of in-person and remote access (always with a Remote Access component smaller or almost equivalent to the in-person component).

5.1 Evaluation of proposals

The aim of securing at least two external reviewers for each proposal was achieved in the period starting with the selection of reviewers (2nd of December 2024) and ending with the deadline for the submission of the external reviews (24th of January 2025). However, nearly 10% of the experts that accepted to review a TA proposal did not in the end submit their evaluation within the deadline, notwithstanding several reminders. In conclusion, 44 proposals had 2 reviews, 36 proposals had 3 reviews, 4 proposals only 1 review, and 2 proposals 4 reviews. Thus, the aim of having at least two external reviews was achieved for over 95% of the proposals.

The average score for all 86 proposals was 40.98 (Figure 7), which was initially regarded as a sort of approximate threshold between the proposals deserving of being recommended for access and

those less worth recommending. However, some proposals had very opposite reviews. For each proposal the deviation in the scores per proposal was thus calculated by counting the difference between the highest and the lowest score. In some cases, it was up to >30 points on a total of 50 points. Particular attention was thus given during the Consensus meetings to "Borderline cases" (regarded as proposals that may require longer discussions): those scoring around 40 and those with a high deviation (above 10). Moreover, for several reviewers 40 was considered a good score, because they didn't use the full range of scoring, including the maximum scores. In fact, there were several reviews with scoring around 40 that contained only positive comments, and no shortcomings were highlighted at all. In addition, while many reviews were very detailed (long comments) and provided a statement for each of the 6 criteria, several others were very short and did not follow the proposed instructions to justify the given scores for each evaluation criteria. All these complications were discussed and considered during the consensus meetings.

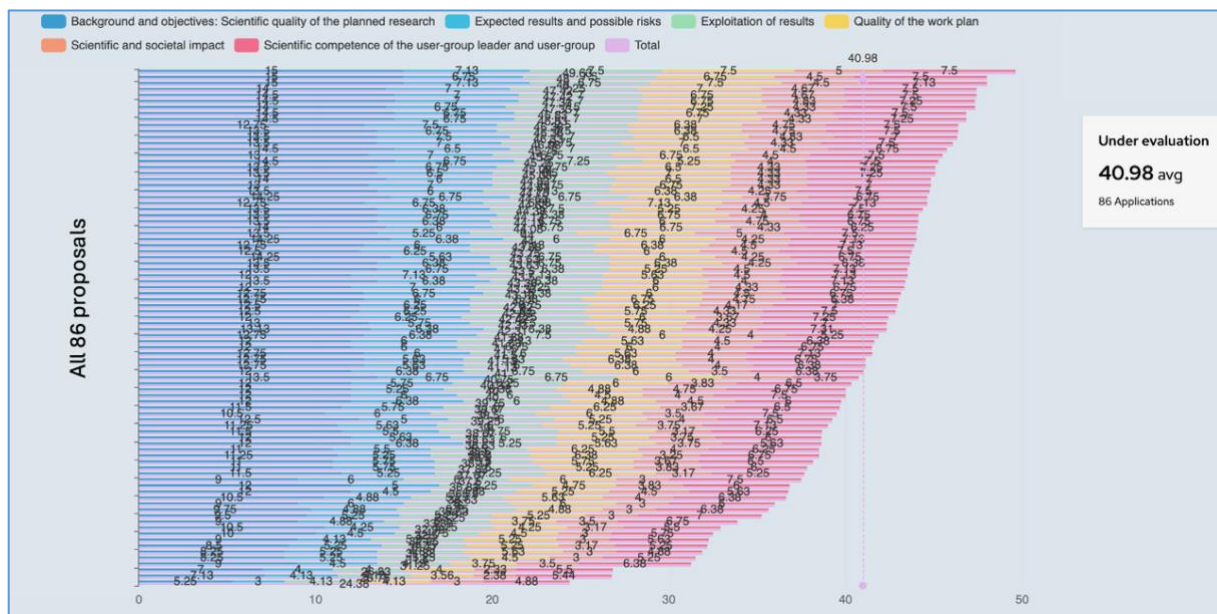


Figure 7. Statistical diagram showing the distribution of the scoring (the six criteria in different colours) for all 86 proposals (from the lowest scored at the bottom to the highest at the top).

5.2 Consensus meetings

During the two weeks following the deadline for the submission of external reviews (from 27th of January to 7th of February 2025) the watchdogs uploaded their statements on the POLARIN TAP, making them available to the whole SLP. The Consensus Meetings for the 1st POLARIN call took place online in nine slots from 10th to 17th of February 2025. During each slot, about ten proposals and their reviews were presented by their watchdogs and discussed jointly, reaching a consensus about

the recommendation for funding. The recommendations and the evaluation statements of the proposals were shared with all SLP members immediately after each consensus meeting and subsequently edited and approved by the panel during the following week.

The outcome of the scientific evaluation of the first TA call was that 46 of the 86 eligible proposals were recommended for funding and sent to the RI operators for the logistic evaluation and access decisions.

5.3 Logistic evaluation

The details of the logistic evaluation of the proposals submitted to the 1st POLARIN TA call are provided in deliverable D2.3 (Logistic evaluation report, due on month 20). It is thus simply reported here that 37 projects were selected for funding and granted access.

The projects granted access will make use of 28 RIs: 19 to Arctic RIs (two of them in combination of in-person access and remote access, and the rest as in-person access), 3 to Antarctic RIs (one of them either in combination of in-person access and remote access) and 6 to vessels. Out of the 37 User Group Leaders, 24% are non-European and 38% are Early Career Researchers (ECR). In total, there are 134 users accessing the RIs in the supported TA User Groups, out of which 50% are female.

6 Conclusions

The response to the 1st POLARIN call was outstanding, with nearly a hundred proposals submitted.

We were particularly encouraged by the strong participation of early career researchers. The evaluation and selection process developed in a quite smooth way, as it was organized in a structured way, impartial, and scientifically grounded. In fact, impartiality was safeguarded by the attentive selection of reviewers and the request to declare the conflict of interest and confidentiality clause. On the scientific ground, the evaluation criteria were specifically designed to reflect what was asked in the project description, CV and additional documents. However, the high number and large diversity of both the proposals and the offering access was quite challenging to be handled.

Moreover, finding the appropriate reviewers was a very demanding challenge. In fact, due to the high level of international and institutional collaboration in the submitted proposals, a very high number of potential reviewers had a conflict of interest with many of the proposals. In addition, the timing, at the turn of Christmas vacations, presented a challenge in finding available reviewers. Since the number of polar scientists with an expertise in some specific scientific disciplines represented in the proposals is rather limited and usually have established collaboration via the past or current

projects, joint papers or plans for joint proposals, it took a significant amount of time and effort to identify independent researchers to be invited as reviewers. A relatively high number of no replies and rejections presented a further obstacle. Despite of these difficulties, we consider that external reviews are anyhow necessary to ensure a transparent and fair proposal evaluation.

7 Acknowledgements

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