



eLTER Preparatory Phase Project

## **eLTER Host Selection Process**

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## Summary

For the Central Services of the distributed eLTER RI, host organisations will be selected in a competitive way based upon a call for applications. These central components will consist of a Head Office, a Service Portal, and Topic Centres and potential other units the eLTER Interim Council will agree on. While there are currently four Topic Centres foreseen for data quality, modelling, interoperability and innovation, the service concept work is still ongoing and may lead to changes in the tentative Topic Centres. The Central Services of the eLTER RI may be set up in various legal formats and can be constructed physically or in some cases also virtually.

The host selection process will encompass the following steps:

1. Call for host applications
2. File management, eligibility and plausibility checking
3. Evaluation of the applications and hearing of candidate host organisations or host consortia
4. Suggestion of host institutions to the eLTER Interim Council for approval

For the purpose of administering this process, the eLTER Technical Host Selection Team will be set up. It will consist of eLTER PPP beneficiary employees. For the evaluation, the eLTER Host Applications Evaluation Committee will be put together consisting of experts partly from within and partly external to eLTER. For each group, mechanisms will be installed that make certain that no member has conflicts of interest.

Once the Evaluation Committee has evaluated and (in case of more than one application) ranked the candidates to host the eLTER RI central components, these recommendations will be presented to the eLTER Interim Council for approval.

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## 1 Purpose and content of this document

eLTER is a distributed Research Infrastructure (RI). Its Central Services comprise various structural elements, namely the Head Office, the Service Portal and the Topic Centres. All these entities will be hosted by various institutions or consortia of institutions across Europe. The actions and guiding principles how eLTER will select these host institutions are laid out in the present text. It describes the principles for the selection process, including the timeframe and sequence of steps to be taken by all parties involved, and the criteria that will be decisive for the selection of the host organisations.

As background and framework information, before describing how host organisations will be selected, the text begins with a short outline of the components that will have to be hosted, that is, the current planning regarding the foreseen Central Services.

## 2 The Central Services of the eLTER RI

### 2.1 Components of the distributed eLTER RI

The distributed eLTER RI will consist of the national and the central services. The national services (NRIs) perform research and observations and deliver eLTER data, and can be physically, remotely, and virtually accessed by users through the service portal. A set of central services was defined in the eLTER ESFRI 2018 Roadmap application. The concept foresees central services of a general nature and service-oriented topic centres and potential other units the eLTER Interim Council might agree on. This planning is currently being further developed and refined in the framework of the eLTER PPP (Preparatory Phase Project). Thus, the below description is tentative.

#### 2.1.1 eLTER general components

The **eLTER Head Office** will provide overall leadership for the eLTER RI and conduct the coordination of major RI activities and coordinate the scientific and strategic planning. It will handle the RI budget, and be the central contact point of the RI towards all its stakeholders. It will perform training and outreach activities and oversee the functionality of the eLTER Service Portal.

The **eLTER Services Portal** will be the interface and information hub for the eLTER users and provide one-stop access to all eLTER services, such as VA (Virtual Access), TA-RA (Transnational and Remote Access), and all further capabilities of the RI. The eLTER DIP (Data Integration Platform) which is a part of the eLTER Services Portal, will enable all data discovery, analyses, visualisation and download services (including access to all modules of the eLTER IT architecture like the site registry DEIMS-SDR<sup>1</sup>).

### 2.1.2 Tentative planning of the eLTER topic centres

While the eLTER service concept work is still ongoing, the below list shows the current status of the planning grouped by Topical Service Areas (TSAs) and without anticipating any decision on the final structure or Topic Centres.

**Quality Assurance for Data (QAD)** will develop, consult and implement the eLTER RI data policy and ensure validity, quality and interoperability of data within the RI, accessibility through the eLTER Service Portal and interoperability with collaborating RIs. Among other functionalities, it will oversee the implementation of data standards across the RI, quality checks for metadata and calibration and validation of observational data coming from eLTER sites. Activities also comprise the creation of eLTER Information Clusters drawing from a wide range of other sources.

**Modelling and Analysis Tools (MAT)** will operate a range of modelling and analysis tools accessible through a platform and create new methods to explore, analyse and present the eLTER network data, including construction of synthesised historic site records, and prediction of future scenarios on the basis of historic and current trends. In collaboration with QAD, it will provide tools to synthesise data products at the network level either across Europe and/or beyond, jointly with other networks and RIs.

**Design, Interoperability and Synthesis (DIS)** will ensure research synergies internally and externally regarding the ongoing integration of the eLTER RI network design and also regarding close interaction with related RIs and the implementation of the transdisciplinary research approach as advocated by the LTSE component of the eLTER RI. It will closely collaborate with MAT and QAD in this regard. Among other activities, it will be interfacing and collaborating with other networks and RIs for co-design and joint management of in situ sites and organise multi-stakeholder collaborative research programmes.

**Technical Innovation and Development (TID)** will liaise with industrial partners and public bodies to enable research and development of novel technologies for data capture, analyses and exploitation. Through these collaborations, the RI will explore options to develop new sensors, earth observation, and analytics technologies with a

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<sup>1</sup> Dynamic Environmental Information Management System – Site and Data Registry. See <https://deims.org>

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range of partners in the commercial and public sector on the basis of users' feedback of such equipment and programs.

## 2.2 Place of the establishment

**Physical location:** Both independent and linked legal entities (e.g. a subsidiary company) could be established on the host applicant's premises or on own premises. A subcontractor (an organisation subcontracted by the host applicant to provide some or all services of the CS) would work on its own premises, whereas a department/team would be established inside the host organisation's premises.

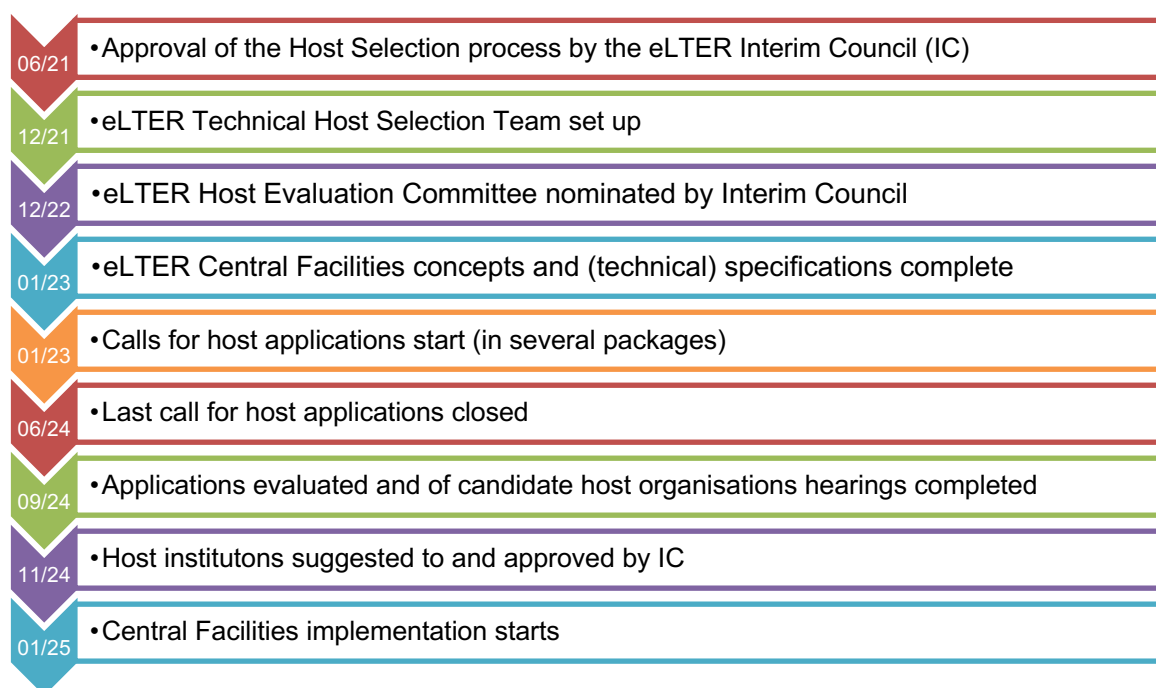
**Virtual approaches:** eLTER services could entirely or partly be installed virtually and use cloud services operated by host organisations or by third parties, e.g. in the framework of the EOSC<sup>2</sup> services hub. In that case, the definite location would be a secondary aspect. Such approaches seem feasible for computing related activities, such as modelling, and also, at least to a degree, for hosting online trainings and workshops. Nevertheless, also a virtual service needs staff which not only sets it up, but maintains and updates it, interacts with the service users and takes responsibility towards the eLTER RI.

## 2.3 Timing of the establishment

The planning of each foreseen eLTER Central Service must follow the tentative timeline of the host selection process (Figure 1) and reflect the current status of the eLTER timeline and lifecycle phases as described in the eLTER RI governance and management plan (eLTER PPP Deliverable 2.2).

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<sup>2</sup> EOSC: European Open Science Cloud, see <https://www.egi.eu/about/newsletters/what-is-the-european-open-science-cloud>



**Figure 1: Tentative time-line of the eLTER Central Services host selection process.**

Each of the mentioned elements is described in the text below.

### 3 Process steps during the host selection

The eLTER host selection process will consist of the following steps:

- 1) Call for host applications
- 2) File management, eligibility and plausibility checking
- 3) Evaluation of the applications received and hearing of candidate host organisations
- 4) Recommendation of host institutions to the eLTER Interim Council (IC) for approval

#### **eLTER Technical Host Selection Team**

For the purpose of operationally handling the process, the eLTER Technical Host Selection Team will be put together from beneficiary employees who collaborate in the eLTER PPP (Preparatory Phase Project). To join the team every member has to sign a declaration of not having conflict of interest. Should a conflict of interest emerge, the respective person will be replaced. Members will be employees of organisations that do not intend to apply to host a central component of the eLTER RI.



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### 3.1 Call for host applications

The call will be published by the eLTER Technical Host Selection Team, and information about this call will be distributed using the eLTER standard communication channels (e.g. eLTER newsletter, project-internal mailing lists, social media). The structuring and timing of the calls will consider the nature of the services and possibilities of potential hosts, but primarily secure an efficient overall eLTER implementation process. For the purpose of efficiency, as many applications as possible will be handled at the same time.

#### 3.1.1 Major elements of the call

**Eligibility criteria:** Applications are invited from Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) which are part of the eLTER PPP or eLTER PLUS projects as a beneficiary or PPP Associate Partner (which requires that they have signed the eLTER MoU).

**Endorsement:** The applicant organisation or consortia should be endorsed by the respective eLTER National Coordinator or eLTER National Coordinators in case, consortium members from several countries apply, and the related national delegation(s) in the eLTER Interim Council.

**Evaluation criteria:** Applicants will be informed about the criteria against which their application will be judged (see 4.3.1).

**Legal options and advice:** eLTER will be developed to an ERIC; applicants should thus indicate whether they agree that their proposed Central Service should be included into the eLTER ERIC or if they prefer another legal format and, in the latter case, which relation the proposed Central Service should have to the eLTER ERIC. The call text will provide information about the funding and governance consequences of this choice.

**Technical requirements:** Currently, the specifications to be addressed by the foreseen eLTER RI Central Services and their functionalities (see 3.1) are being worked out and subsequently tested jointly by the projects eLTER PPP and eLTER PLUS in collaboration with the respective scientific communities. This process is ongoing work which is already running and far advanced but which will still be ongoing at the time the calls are published. The state of this work at the time the call is published will be summarised and presented as part of the call information

**eLTER strategy and concept:** Applicants must comply with the eLTER RI strategy, service portfolio, design and governance as the overall structural framework within which the entity will operate that they intend to host. For this purpose, a list of reference documents will be provided including but not necessarily limited to:

- eLTER RI strategic plan
- eLTER RI governance and management plan
- User requirements analysis and Central Service portfolio
- eLTER RI Central Services and topic centres delivery specifications
- User Requirements analysis and Central Service portfolio
- Concept and extension of central data node capabilities

### 3.1.2 Required application content:

Applicants will be asked to provide the following information:

- Strategic vision of the Central Service they wish to host
- Design of the Central Service
- Work plan with general descriptions of services to be provided and operational description
- Business model, cost structure and funding model with a concrete 5-year funding plan and 10-year funding perspectives and financial commitment demonstrated through a commitment letter from the applying organisation(s).
- Governance and legal model of the Central Service
- Description of the hosting organisation commitment (indicated by the attached commitment letter)
- Further information may be required at the time the call is published.

To guide applicants and to support them regarding the provision of the complete and correct information which is needed (including the proper length of the text passages) and the submission process, an online application mechanism will be provided consisting of a questionnaire and pre-defined uploads.

## 3.2 File management, eligibility and plausibility checking

The eLTER Technical Host Selection Team will collect all received files (filled in templates and supporting files) in a dedicated secure file store. It will set up an appropriate platform for organising its work and for documenting the progress made and the status of each of the applications.

At the same time, eligibility and plausibility checking will be conducted by the eLTER Technical Host Selection Team as well. Thereby, the following criteria will be applied:

- **Completeness** of the application and correctly filled in fields of the template (the latter refers to the content being in line with the related question, not to the quality of the answer).

- **Eligibility** as a non-profit RPO (research performing organisation) which is either eLTER PPP or eLTER PLUS beneficiary or eLTER PPP Associate Partner. Indeed, the APP (Associate Partnership Programme) is open to any RPO under the precondition that it signs the eLTER MoU and thereby confirms that this organisation supports the eLTER science case and acknowledges the need for the sustainable eLTER Research Infrastructure. These current preconditions for host applications on the one hand keep the doors open to a wide range of interested parties inside and outside of the current eLTER PPP and eLTER PLUS consortia, and on the other hand avoid that structural or process/community outsiders become hosts. RPO is the only type of organisation which may apply because eLTER fulfils a mission towards the European societies and wishes not to be dependent on short-term economic considerations. Therefore, commercial organisations are not eligible for applying.
- **Clear links with eLTER work** whereby again the quality of this link will be considered during the evaluation process. However, if no practical LTER related experience exists, the application will not be eligible and not be subjected to the time-consuming evaluation in line with the above articulated eligibility criteria. This link refers to practical experience with LTER related work and connections to LTER communities in Europe, for instance previous participation in LTER related European collaborative projects.

Major shortcomings will result in an immediate rejection of the application. Minor shortcomings, however, will not, but the applicants will be asked for clarifications (Issues obviously resulting from negligence rather than from lacking competence are considered minor shortcomings and can be quickly resolved by the applicant).

### 3.3 Evaluation of the applications and hearing of candidate host organisations

The eLTER Technical Host Selection Team together with the eLTER PPP coordination will fill the eLTER Host Applications Evaluation Committee in that they locate potential participants and ask them for their willingness to become members. They will provide a list of these potential members to the eLTER PPP and eLTER PLUS Steering Committees, who may amend the list and will rank the candidates. The composition of the committee will then be proposed to the eLTER Interim Council who will be requested to approve and formally nominate the Committee.

The applications to host a Central Service of the eLTER RI will be evaluated by the Evaluation Committee in terms of the below criteria. For each application, the committee will write a consensus evaluation report. Applicants will receive this report

and have the option to reply to issues raised in the report in writing if they wish. These replies will be considered in the subsequent hearing. Criteria will be weighted regarding the various Central Services of the eLTER RI (see 2.1). E.g. for a technical/scientific element, information management capacity will be much more decisive than for the Head Office, where primarily managerial capacity will be needed.

#### **eLTER Host Applications Evaluation Committee**

Evaluators will be experts of a high reputation who possess the needed expertise and experience regarding the relevant scientific fields, systems engineering and operational management, and also regarding the administrative and operational aspects of running a large, distributed Research Infrastructure (RI). These evaluators will be requested to sign a declaration that they have no conflict of interest. To combine internal knowledge with external perspectives, half of the members of the panel will be internal to eLTER, and half will be external. The international counterpart to eLTER, ILTER<sup>3</sup>, or other international partnerships of eLTER (e.g. GERI) may be one source to locate potential external experts to serve on the panel.

### **3.3.1 Evaluation Criteria**

**Design excellence:** The technical scope and the implementation plan should clearly be in line with the given technical requirements for the respective Central Service, and they should be well embedded into the eLTER strategic planning and the foreseen overall eLTER network development. Interaction with other RIs should be outlined.

**Science and capacity:** The applicant should demonstrate state-of-the-art proficiency and experience in the respective fields and show an adequate managerial/administrative record regarding large scientific/technical international undertakings. If relevant, evidence with respect to the needed data management capabilities should be given as well.

**Operational excellence:** The workplan should be realistic and achievable within the time frame and the resources available. The plan to construct the Central Service should also consider all research infrastructure lifecycle phases: Preparation, Implementation, Operation and Decommissioning. The internal operational structure and the planned governance of the proposed entity and its preferred relation to the eLTER ERIC should be defined and a proper day-to-day administrative and managerial approach be given. In case of a consortium applying, the collaboration between the partners should be comprehensively explained with clearly defined roles

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<sup>3</sup> ILTER: International Long Term Ecological Research Network, see <https://www.ilter.network>

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and leadership. If policy or regulatory issues may arise, these must be adequately addressed.

**Commitment and finances:** A sound human and other resources plan must be provided for the implementation and operation. The overall financial plan for the entity should be realistic and complete. Political and financial long-term commitment must be clearly demonstrated of the country/countries the hosting institutions are situated within. A commitment letter from the applying institute(s) is requested. This letter should show a financial and long-term operational commitment towards the proposed Central Service. The funding model has to mandatorily contain a concrete 5-year funding plan and explain the 10-year funding options and perspectives beyond.

**Interfaces with LTER past and future:** Experience regarding LTER work in general must be evidenced and a long-standing embedding of the applicant institution into the European LTER community. Specific experience regarding the services to be hosted within an LTER framework should be outlined. A preliminary implementation plan should take into account the eLTER timeline and indicate when the service provision is planned to be ready.

### 3.3.2 Hearing between the Evaluation Committee and host applicants

After evaluating the received applications, the eLTER Host Applications Evaluation Committee will seek to further examine the quality and feasibility of the applications in hearings (one per application) and to better understand details that may have remained unclear after reading. Therefore, each applicant will be invited to a hearing, independently of the outcome of the evaluation. The number of applications will be small, so that this approach will be manageable. This hearing also serves the purpose to explain to the applicants the decision and the change requests (comments) by the Committee and, likewise, to enable the applicants to address possible misunderstandings by Committee members. Therefore, inviting each applicant is considered a matter of fairness.

The eLTER Technical Host Selection Team will arrange for the hearing. All Committee members must be present, the leading authors of the application and, if needed, further representatives of the applicant organisations. In the case of consortia applying, at least one representative of each member organisation must be present. For each applicant organisation, at least one representative must have the legal mandate to speak on behalf of their organisation and commit it to host an eLTER Central Service. If needed, some persons may participate via conference call. Attendance will be limited to the persons listed herein, and the meeting will be considered a confidential undertaking among them.

Applicants should provide a concise opening statement and thereafter answer the questions posed by Committee members. Likewise, applicants may ask for clarifications from the Committee regarding the evaluation report.

During the hearing, the eLTER Technical Host Selection Team will take detailed minutes. Regardless whether the meeting is conducted online or in-person or in hybrid mode, an audio recording will be produced to support the minute taking.

After the hearing, the applicants are requested to submit their written response to the meeting minutes. This response will be added to the file collection that will be forming the foundation for the Evaluation Committee's recommendations to the Interim Council.

### **3.4 Recommendation of host institutions to the eLTER Interim Council for approval**

#### **3.4.1 Host selection meeting preparation**

Once the eLTER Host Evaluation Committee consensually articulates an expert view regarding the applications and (in case of more than one application per central service element) has agreed on a ranking, it will recommend the approval of these hosts to the eLTER Technical Host Selection Team. The eLTER Technical Host Selection Team will prepare a list of candidate host organisations and a summary report of the views of the Evaluation Committee for the eLTER Interim Council for decision.

Prior to the meeting, during which the host approval will take place, the eLTER Interim Council delegates will receive a listing of all applications including the evaluation summaries, and Evaluation Committee recommendations and rankings. These files and also the complete applications will be made digitally available to the IC.

#### **3.4.2 Recommended content for the host selection meeting**

During the IC meeting, the Chair of the eLTER Host Evaluation Committee will provide an overview of the applications received, the outcome of the evaluation process, and the reasoning for the recommendations to the Interim Council for possible host approval.

Thereafter one representative per application will – as a guest speaker – briefly present their concept. The IC delegates will then have the opportunity to ask questions to the applicants. Nevertheless, this IC meeting will not be a repetition of the preceding

hearing, but it is intended to clearly inform the IC delegates about the details of the applications received.

After this information session, the applicant representatives will leave the meeting. IC delegates may choose to continue the discussion among themselves or to proceed to the voting regarding approval or rejection of the applications. If decided by the IC upon suggestion by the Chair of the eLTER Host Evaluation Committee in preparation of the host selection meeting, members of the eLTER Host Evaluation Committee might be invited to the host selection meeting to report on selected matters or respond to questions of the IC members.

Should certain IC delegates have objections towards one or more of the applications, they may choose to either reject them altogether or to articulate a conditional approval based on the above stated evaluation criteria. Finally, approval or disapproval will happen in a closed voting. The anonymity of the voting is considered important to avoid conflicts between representatives of possibly rejected applications and the IC delegates who voted against them. A two-thirds majority of the members represented in the meeting is needed for approval.

### **3.4.3 Notification of the applicants**

Directly after the meeting, the applicants will be informed by the Technical Host Selection Team about the outcome. Those whose applications were approved, will be invited for detailed discussions with the project coordination and pertinent workpackage leaders to initiate the set-up of the respective Central Services of the eLTER RI.

## **4 Outlook**

The present text serves the purpose to establish consensus among the eLTER PPP consortium and the eLTER Interim Council (IC) as to how eLTER will administer its host selection process. The actual host selection activity will require further prerequisites before it can be initiated:

The detailed composition of the eLTER service portfolio must be defined and agreed, and the central services conceptualisation must be completed to a degree that all Central Services are specified with sufficient detail. The services definition includes a piloting effort that is already ongoing in collaboration with service users. This piloting fosters the establishment of the detailed technical features and also demonstrates the related indicative financial needs for implementation. The outcomes will become part of the service requirements presented as part of the call for hosting institutions.

The eLTER Host Selection Process (or parts) might be further elaborated and modified according to emerging needs as the eLTER ESFRI process advances. Changes will be decided by the IC in accordance with its rules of procedure.

A subsequent report on the host selection outcomes will be presented near the end of the project.