

# **Minutes of the First Meeting (telecon) of the Interim Management Committee of the European Astrobiology Institute**

**19 June 2019, 13:00 - 15:45 CEST**

**Present:** C. Boccato, D. Breuer, C. Briones, J-P. de Vera, V. Debaille, D. Dunér, M. Gargaud, W. Geppert, E. Javaux, Z. Kanuchova, Kereszturi A., J. Martinez Frias, N. Mason, J. Novaková, K. Olsson-Francis, A. Provenzale, E. Szuszkewicz, R. Taubner, M. Viso, F. Westall, J. L'Haridon

## **1. Opening of the telecon**

W. Geppert opened the telecon. The agenda was approved.

## **2. General policy about minutes, choice of meeting secretary**

Z. Kanuchová and J. L'Haridon created draft minutes, W. Geppert edited together a synopsis.

## **3. General Assembly Liblice: Review and Lessons Learned**

W. Geppert summarised the GA in Liblice. The meeting was quite successful with a lot of positive resonances from attendees. A very good management committee was elected with almost all positions filled. W. Geppert thanked the people that have been involved in the set-up of the programme and the organisation of the event, especially Ivana Paidarová (Czech Academy of Sciences). More than 70 scientists and students attended the event and there was a very good scientific programme.

Nevertheless, the logistic was quite challenging as people were changing their mind frequently about attendance and shuttle times. This was difficult to administer and we should avoid this next time. Also the fact that many registrants did not follow the instructions for the payment thoroughly led to a huge workload on staff from the J. Heyrovský Institute. This should not happen in the future. The accommodation for the next GA will be booked by individuals directly on the venue webpage. Sadly the shuttle between airport and venue will remain an issue.

F. Westall remarked that we should make clear the complementarity of EANA and EAI and that We have to prove that there is a good synergy between EANA and EAI. There will be a round-table discussion during the next EANA meeting in Orleans in September 3-6. The presence of EAI representative during the meeting would be appreciated – possibly W. Geppert will be able to attend . Also, EAI should be officially represented in the leadership of EANA. The official representative could be the chair. W. Geppert said that there should be a formal decision by EANA to admit a representative of EAI on their Executive Council.

M. Viso agreed that the meeting was very successful and that the next one will be different since it will include reports of the working groups and project teams.. He also said that is necessary to clarify to the external community the respective roles and the compatibility of EANA in the EAI. Frances Westall wrote a letter to EANA community explaining the situation. This letter will be circulated to the EAI community also.

W. Geppert said that EANA is well-represented in the EAI with one representative of EANA in the Board of Trustees and the General Assembly. Also there are lively debates going on in the Working Groups and Project teams and a healthy attendance to the General Assembly. So the sometimes heard depiction of the of a top-down entity is somewhat distortive.

#### **4. Research Infrastructure Starting Community Proposal (Name/Focus of Proposal)**

W. Geppert proposed the following working titles

**EAI – ILAST** which stands for:

“The European **Astrobiology Institute: A new Initiative to study Life Across Space and Time**”

for generic proposals

and “The European **Astrobiology Institute: Infrastructures to study Life Across Space and Time**”

for the Research Infrastructure proposal. He agreed with N. Mason that it is vital to include the word “infrastructure” in the Horizon 2020 RI Starting Community proposal.

N. Mason remarked that a Research Infrastructure proposal will not be able to include every participating entity of the EAI as beneficiaries (i. e. those that administrate money), but only a subset of selected institutions. A reasonable maximal number would probably be 20-30 based on the feedback obtained from the Europlanet RI. All EAI institutions will, however, have the possibility to receive funds from the RI for participating in its activities. It is important

to clarify it to avoid misunderstandings and due to the fact that the EU deems networks with a lot of beneficiaries as unmanageable.

A. Provenzale stressed that infrastructure proposals give money for networking activities and enabling access to facilities, but research should still be funded independently. The objective of an RI is to enable people to facilities they would otherwise be unable to access (e.g. small laboratory access to larger infrastructures)

E. Javaux asked for a clarification if the money planned only for improving the existing facilities or also for developing new ones and field activities and if there is a budget for the research or salary of technicians.

N. Mason and W. Geppert clarified that funds are available for both developing and improving facilities. They further answered that the RI will not provide financial support to hire people on a full-time basis. The research infrastructure will not provide financial support to hire people. Funding technical support staff to a limited extent is possible. Otherwise small laboratories will not be able to provide access to facilities without financial support. Also the opportunity exists to buy consumables if they are to be used during their visit.

N. Mason remarked that usually 20-25% (~1M over 4 years) of the budget of a RI Starting Community will be allocated to networking activities. An ambitious plan for Networking activities could be very good especially at the beginning of a RI Starting community to bring people together. He further listed three types of activities in a RI like Europlanet:

- transnational access (field work and labs visits)
- networking
- virtual access

RIs can issue calls for grants allowing people/entities outside the infrastructure to obtain funding for networking activities and transnational access,

## **5. Templeton Foundation application**

W. Geppert predicted that it will be very difficult to get the Templeton funding if the topic does not exactly match the strategy of the Foundation. “Science of Purpose” of the Foundation should be fitting. One of its sub-priorities is: “Long-term directional trends”, defined as:

*“The emergence of life is one of the biggest mysteries in science. Somehow, increases in molecular complexity lead to gains in*

*information, self-regulation, autocatalytic efficiency, and robustness. How might the physical laws that govern the evolution of the cosmos support the emergence of life? Are there principles or constraints in nature that operate at the abiotic-biotic interface or give rise to directional trends in evolutionary transitions?"*

Comment: in a subsequent discussion the MC decided to **refrain from** filing an application to the Foundation due to involvement of creationists in some of their funded projects.

A general discussion about our research strategy ensued. J. Novaková said that any proposal goals still to have to be set clarifying what is the research to be done by EAI. W. Geppert remarked that it will be the task of the Working Groups of the EAI. F. Westall said that also the subject of traces of life can be included. J. Novaková stressed that working across several fields will be requested as interdisciplinary projects are generally more successful.

Generally, existing documents (after necessary updates) could be used for the mapping out of the general Research Strategy of the EAI and our proposals. These documents should be circulated to WGs. WGs can use them to develop their own priorities. They include

- The white paper "Astrobiology and Society in Europe Today"
- The ASTROMAP roadmap
- The NASA Astrobiology Roadmap

A discussion followed about the idea of Thomas Henning (Max Planck Institute for Astronomy) shared via e-mail : "to move the institute from a virtual entity to a real existing institute".

W. Geppert said that that this is a very good long term goal and including the idea to build a sustainable physical structure into grant proposals might be a good approach. However, N. Mason made the point that it might be a bit premature to start such an endeavour immediately at the launch of the EAI stating that "one should not try to run before one can walk".

N. Mason further added that a physical institute would favour the host country triggering debates of fairness. There has also been an e-mail by G. Hasinger that ESA will not fund a physical institute in our field.

## **6. Other funding sources**

N. Mason will circulate the EU Space Program Wolf suggested that it should be discussed in the Working Group “Funding and Policy”.

## **7. General Assembly 2020 (Name, layout, administration status of preparation)**

Two different names for the scientific programme have been proposed: “European Astrobiology Conference” or “BEACON - Biannual European Astrobiology Conference” It seems that a majority favours BEACON. W. Geppert has circulated a (preliminary) logo. It was remarked that BEACON has no astrobiology connection, thus the acronym should not be overused.

The invited speakers should be selected over the summer by the respective Working Groups and Project teams.

F. Westall opined that there is an overlap of EANA and EAI meetings. If EAI holds biannual meetings then EANA tries to avoid overlap in the future. But the organisation of this year’s and next year’s event is already underway.

For our meeting in 2020 W. Geppert proposed 2+1+2 days meeting layout, that is 2 days scientific meeting, 1 day break for excursions and socialising and ends with 2 days scientific meetings.

K. Olsson-Frances proposed scientific program 4 days in a row, so people are not committed for a full week. N. Mason existed that the same issue for EPSC, as many people only come for part of the week. W. Geppert said that 4 days of uninterrupted programme are very tiring and people will start to skip sessions. He suggested that one could strive to end the conference should end on Friday noon, so that people can leave on the afternoon.

M. Viso brought up the question of the goal of the General Assembly. It is provide decisions on pending issues but the meeting is to a large extent organised by working groups and project team of the scientific program of the EAI. The objective of the General Assembly should be to set-up actions / proposals to request funding from EU or other organisms, rather than another scientific meeting.

Concerning Registration fees and refunds W. Geppert suggested free registrations for EAI members. Registration fee for non EAI members should be 180 EUR for scientists and 90 EUR for students.

It was proposed that EAI delegates, invited speakers and other people selected by the Scientific Committee should get a 70 EUR flat refund per attended day. That amount covers accommodation costs in a single room and all meals (full board).

#### **8. First meeting of the Project Team "Impacts and their role in the Formation of Planets, moons and Life"**

The meeting "Impacts and their role in the evolution of life" (Tällberg, Siljan crater area, 10 - 12 June 2019) was a full free-standing conference with more than 50 participants supported by Europlanet and the Swedish Research Council and was very appraised by the participants. Further information under [www.nordicastrobiology.net/Impacts2019](http://www.nordicastrobiology.net/Impacts2019). W. Geppert reported that A.Losiak is very active in building the team. A plan for activities is being set up.

#### **9. Status and planned activities of individual Working Groups and Project teams**

We are at still in the beginning but should use summer to map out action plans and to recruit new members.

#### **10. Status of Participating Organisation and MoUs**

So far MoUs have come in from around half the committed organisations. W. Geppert will meet N. Walter (ESF) to discuss different issues and sign MoUs on 12 July (and also later hopefully somewhere in August, and at EPSC on 15-20 September). EAI participating entities are encouraged to send MoUs from your organisation as soon as possible. MoUs sent to ESF before July can be signed on 12 July in Strasbourg.

Participating Organisations will be asked to create local teams and to nominate Local Coordinators. This is not only vital for the shaping of strong local organisations but also since Local Coordinators exert the right to vote in the GA between ordinary GA meetings. Also the MC and the chair might send out messages of some more administrative nature. Core organisations will need to nominate 2 people to exert the vote in General Assembly decisions between regular meetings.

#### **11. Application of Nor-CEL to become an affiliated group**

MC members were reminded that Affiliated group can participate in EAI activities (e.g. working groups) but have no passive or active voting rights. They also have the right to claim that they are part of the EAI.

Nor-CEL applied to become an affiliated group. There was a general feeling in the MC that there was more information needed before a decision was made. Nevertheless W. Geppert stated that such a decision should be made without any undue delay.

M. Viso took the view if affiliated group do produce peer review science, it should not be part of the EAI. This statement found agreement from the other participants.

M. Viso will contact Nor-CEL via Sohan Jheeta to obtain further information. Based on that he will make a recommendation to the MC in July.

Comment: Sohan Jheeta decided to retract the application after the meeting of the MC.

## **12. Plans for summer, division of tasks**

The following primary plans for summer had been identified (with responsible people in brackets).

- Circulate the EU Space Programme (N. Mason)
- Propose and select invited speakers for the EAI GA in 2020 (All WGs)
- Circulate the letter for EANA about the EAI (. Westall)
- Recruiting of new members for WGs (All MC members and WG Deputy Leaders)
- Circulate the Logo Competition poster (W. Geppert)

## **13. Any other business**

R.-S. Taubner reported about the Logo composition. Two more logos proposals were submitted to the competition. The competition is open till the end of June. It would be useful to circulate the informative poster again. W. Geppert will send it to all WG members.

## **14. Closure of the telecon**

W. Geppert closed the teleconference.