METHOD ARTICLE

An open and transparent process to select ELIXIR Node Services as implemented by ELIXIR-UK [version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 2 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

ELIXIR is the European infrastructure established specifically for the sharing and sustainability of life science data. To provide up-to-date resources and services, ELIXIR needs to undergo a continuous process of refreshing the services provided by its national Nodes. Here we present the approach taken by ELIXIR-UK to address the advice by the ELIXIR Scientific Advisory Board that Nodes need to develop “mechanisms to ensure that each Node continues to be representative of the Bioinformatics efforts within the country”. ELIXIR-UK put in place an open and transparent process to identify potential ELIXIR resources within the UK during late 2015 and early to mid-2016. Areas of strategic strength were identified and Expressions of Interest in these priority areas were requested from the UK community. A set of criteria were established, in discussion with the ELIXIR Hub, and prospective ELIXIR-UK resources were assessed by an independent committee set up by the Node for this purpose. Of 19 resources considered, 14 were judged to be immediately ready to be included in the UK ELIXIR Node’s portfolio. A further five were placed on the Node’s roadmap for future consideration for inclusion. ELIXIR-UK expects to repeat this process regularly to ensure its portfolio continues to reflect its community’s strengths.

Keywords

ELIXIR, ELIXIR-UK, e-Infrastructure, ESFRI

This article is included in the ELIXIR gateway.
Introduction

ELIXIR, the European infrastructure for life science data, is made up of individual Nodes, one for each of the organisation’s constituent members (20 as of 1st November 2016: Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, EMBL-EBI, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK), and a coordinating hub. The individual ELIXIR Nodes provide the services and resources that support the five pillars of ELIXIR (Compute, Tools, Data, Interoperability and Training infrastructures).

ELIXIR nodes need to be able to evolve their contributions to ELIXIR by bringing new services and resources. ELIXIR identifies two types of service: Node-funded services, which are funded nationally and are contributed to ELIXIR from a national Node; and Commissioned Services, which are funded by ELIXIR as a whole via the ELIXIR Hub. In some ELIXIR Nodes, Node-funded services receive funds through their national Nodes; in the case of the UK’s Node, ELIXIR-UK, resource funding is through direct grant funding to resources and services from the national funders. In ELIXIR terms, these are still labelled as “Node-funded”. The process described in the present article was set up to identify Node-funded services and resources for ELIXIR-UK. ELIXIR sets high standards for the services it provides. Consequently, nodes need to take full account of these requirements when selecting and proposing their services, which are ultimately judged for suitability by the ELIXIR Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) and Board of ELIXIR (see the online ELIXIR Handbook for more detail).

ELIXIR-UK was established in September 2013, and as its first contribution to ELIXIR took on a thematic focus, namely of coordinating training activity. More recently, it has sought to expand its remit. To address the SAB’s recommendation that Nodes put in place “mechanisms to ensure that each Node continues to be representative of the Bioinformatics efforts within the country”, ELIXIR-UK developed a process to choose new services and resources to add to its existing portfolio. Its aims in developing this process were to:

- Reflect national strengths and priorities in bioinformatics
- Engage its national community
- Build a robust, transparent and open process that its community would regard as fair and could continue to be applied to allow the Node to develop over time.

Process overview

As illustrated in Figure 1, the process implemented by ELIXIR-UK went through seven key phases, which are expanded on in the following sections:

1. Strategic prioritization
2. Identifying possible candidate resources
3. Setting up appropriate structures
4. Establishing assessment criteria
5. Engaging the community
6. Assessing Expressions of Interest
7. Finalising a new portfolio

Strategic prioritization

The requirement to ensure that each Node continues to be representative of the Bioinformatics efforts within the country could be seen as open ended, and thus could ultimately lead to an ill-focused collection of resources and services. To avoid this, ELIXIR-UK identified a set of priority areas within which to focus submissions to the process. These were initially identified by discussions

![Figure 1. Summary view of the information flow in the ELIXIR-UK Node Expansion process. Items in the red correspond to the numbered list of key phases. Numbers in red correspond to the seven phases of the process listed under the section “Process overview”.

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within the Node and were refined by discussion with the Node’s funding organisations (Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council [BBSRC], Medical Research Council [MRC] and Natural Environment Research Council [NERC]) and with the Scientific Development Group (SDG), which was a community body set up by the Node that is tasked with identifying new node resources (see below).

As a consequence of these discussions, Expressions of Interest (EoIs) were invited in the following priority areas, identified as being of high strategic importance within the UK:

- Human clinical and health ‘omics and related areas in health informatics
- Agricultural ‘omics and related data resources
- Image informatics (including atlases)
- Structural bioinformatics
- Technical infrastructure for interoperability and training including standards

Identifying possible candidates
ELIXIR-UK aimed to reconcile two potentially conflicting drivers in developing its expansion process. Firstly, it wanted to be as open to the UK bioinformatics community as it could. This is an ongoing challenge because a) ELIXIR has incomplete brand recognition within the UK community, and b) is not well-regarded by some, being seen either as a closed club or unproductive. Secondly, the Node wanted to ensure it received Expressions of Interest from potential services and resources that were demonstrably of high value to the international life sciences community. To address these requirements, the Node approached the recruitment of potential candidates in two ways. Firstly, it publicised its “Node Expansion” process well in advance using its web site, Twitter and word-of-mouth. Secondly, it sent targeted emails to potential candidates in two ways. Firstly, it publicised its “Node Expansion” process well in advance using its web site, Twitter and word-of-mouth. Secondly, it sent targeted emails to potential candidates.

To facilitate applicants demonstrating that their resources fulfilled these criteria, an Expression of Interest template form was provided, also via Google documents.

The criteria developed by EXCELERATE Work Package 3 have subsequently been finalised and form the basis of the ELIXIR process for selection of Core Data Resources’.

Engaging the community
As outlined, it was important to ensure community buy-in to this process (in order to ensure that the Node was able to engage sufficient high quality resources) and at the same time it was important to be sure that community members who might be interested in participating in ELIXIR-UK were aware of what was required and the expectations that would be placed on them as ELIXIR-UK Node resources. Formal community engagement took place in two phases: a webinar, led by the Head of Node (CAG) and Node Coordinator (JMH), in February 2016 and a workshop, hosted at the Wellcome Trust building in London, in March 2016. The aim of the webinar was to introduce ELIXIR and ELIXIR-UK and the rationale behind the node expansion process. The aim of the workshop was to introduce and discuss the assessment criteria in detail, so that potential applicants could be clear as to what was required.
The presentation given at the workshop is available via Slideshare. At this stage a deadline was set for the receipt of Expressions of Interest by the Node. It is worth noting that the deadlines for the process were tight: EoIs were requested by the end of March 2016 and the assessment meeting took place at the end of April with some iterations taking place in May. We were fortunate in being able to run such a tight schedule due to a) clear and lightweight requirements for the EoIs; b) what we believe to be clear and effective communications; and c) motivated applicants and SDG members.

Assessment of Expressions of Interest

EoIs were assessed by the SDG against the published set of criteria. To facilitate assessment of EoIs, three group members were allocated to each EoI (18 were submitted). The three members were asked to score EoIs from 1 to 4: 1 = ready for inclusion in ELIXIR (“infrastructure ready”); 2 = further discussion or clarification needed; 3 = not ready, but suitable enough to be placed on a roadmap for future inclusion; 4 = not suitable. The assessments for each EoI were introduced by one member of the group leading on to an open discussion. Representatives of the Node funders and the ELIXIR-UK executive observed the meeting to give advice on strategic alignment. EoIs were given a consensus final score using the same scale as before, with a score of 2 in this case representing the need for further clarification of issues raised by the group. Resources given a 2 rating were asked for further information, which led to their final score being revised upwards or downwards in a subsequent iteration.

Results of the assessment

The outcomes of the assessment are summarised in Table 1. Nine EoIs were considered to be infrastructure ready (score of 1) on the first pass of assessment, and a further five were asked for more detail on their proposal (score of 2).

An iteration of discussions with resource scientists allowed questions raised by the SDG to be considered further. Where these were answered satisfactorily, resources were moved up to infrastructure-ready status. Otherwise they were put on the roadmap or, in one case, referred to the ELIXIR SAB for further comment (in this latter case, SAB guidance subsequently resulted in it being accepted as infrastructure ready).

After ratification by the ELIXIR-UK executive and notification to the ELIXIR Hub, highly rated resources were included directly into the Node’s portfolio and were included in the Node Application presented to the ELIXIR SAB in June 2016 and the ELIXIR Board in November 2016. Others were placed on the Node’s roadmap for possible future inclusion.

The services and resources selected as ready for immediate inclusion are listed in Table 2.

Future activities and conclusions

We believe that the process outlined here was open, transparent and fair. We note that the “success rate” of the process was high. No resources were rejected outright and more than 70% were promoted immediately to the Node’s portfolio. This does not reflect a lax process, but is likely to have had a number of contributing factors, including:

- The fact that this was the first call of this kind meant that the Node could call on a number of outstanding, internationally-acknowledged resources. The resources placed on the roadmap were generally also well regarded, but usually in an early phase of their development. Our expectation is that most of these will be recognised as Node-funded resources in future.
- There was a clear explanation and open presentation of the high standards expected of successful resource. Therefore, it is likely that only resources that considered they had a realistic chance of success after the webinar and workshop put their names forward. Consequently, we did not receive any truly speculative proposals.

Another aspect of the process we outline here is the short time period over which it was carried out. In particular, resources were only given four weeks to submit EoIs. A number of features of the process facilitated this: clear timelines, clear guidance as to what was required, the availability of a template for EoIs that helped proposers to compile their EoIs, and lightweight requirements for completing EoIs, which were nevertheless sufficient to allow the SDG to carry out its work effectively. Engagement at a senior level by both the Node and proposers was also important. It was also important to organise meetings, especially of the SDG, sufficiently ahead of time to allow members to both assess the EoIs and attend the meetings, either in person or remotely.

To maintain and continue to improve the Node’s alignment with UK research strengths, it plans to hold regular refresh exercises to introduce new resources into the Node. Plans for how this will be
Table 2. Resources judged to be ready for inclusion in ELIXIR at the end of the assessment process.
Resources are classified by strategic themes within ELIXIR-UK.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Strategic theme</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensembl – farmed and domesticated animals</td>
<td>Agri-food data</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ensembl.org">www.ensembl.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathogen Host Interactions Database (PHI-base)</td>
<td>Agri-food data</td>
<td><a href="http://www.phi-base.org">http://www.phi-base.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUPHAR/BPS Guide to Pharmacology</td>
<td>Human health &amp; disease data</td>
<td><a href="http://www.guidetopharmacology.org">www.guidetopharmacology.org</a></td>
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<td>Interoperability services</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Interoperability services</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Protein structure &amp; function</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalview and the Dundee Resource for Sequence Analysis and Structure Prediction</td>
<td>Protein structure &amp; function</td>
<td><a href="http://www.jalview.org">www.jalview.org</a> <a href="http://www.compbio.dundee.ac.uk/jpred">www.compbio.dundee.ac.uk/jpred</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyre2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>TeSS (Training e-Support System)</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td><a href="https://tess.elixir-uk.org/">https://tess.elixir-uk.org/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*References for the databases/tools have been added where available.

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done are currently under development. To pursue this process we expect that we will need to develop community engagement in the specific priority areas, so that potential proposers are primed.

**Author contributions**

JMH developed the process, wrote the manuscript; AG chaired the Scientific Development Group; CPP contributed to the early development of the process; CAG led engagement activities and oversaw the process.

**Competing interests**

No competing interests were disclosed.

**Grant information**

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The Scientific Development Group consisted of: Alf Game (Independent; Chair)
Mark Bailey (Centre for Ecology and Hydrology)
Win Hide (University of Sheffield)
Simon Hubbard (University of Manchester)
Nick Luscombe (UCL/Francis Crick Institute)
Sean May (University of Nottingham)
Andrew Morris (University of Edinburgh)
Chris Rawlings (Rothamsted Research)

Denis Shields (University College Dublin)
Will Spooner (Eagle Genomics)
Mike Sternberg (Imperial College)
David Westhead (University of Leeds)

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References

Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ✔️  ❓  ❓

Version 1

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Janet Kelso
Department of Evolutionary Genetics, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Germany

This manuscript describes the process whereby the UK node of ELIXIR identifies and prioritises services for inclusion in the node.

It is an important contribution as it is the first time a strategy for service identification and prioritization has been documented for an ELIXIR nodes, and it may be able to be generalized for use by other nodes of the ELIXIR network. It would be good if the authors could comment on the extent to which this approach is generalizable to other nodes, and on whether there are aspects that are unique to the UK node.

The authors should clarify early on that the ‘services’ that ELIXIR nodes may offer may include any combination of software, data resources and training. This is implied, but may not be completely clear to readers unfamiliar with ELIXIR.

The authors focus primarily on a process to include new services to the UK ELIXIR node. It would be good to add a brief section that discusses long-term evaluation of existing services in order to assess ongoing quality and relevance, and to plan for retirement of services as required.

There are places where it is unclear who represents “the Node” eg: “These were initially identified by discussions within the Node” and “Brainstorming by members of the existing node”. It may be useful to explain who is responsible for the Node and decisions taken by “the Node”, and therefore for the strategic prioritization and evaluation.

Could the template for EoI be made available for other nodes wishing to follow a similar process?

It would be useful to expand briefly on what “Work Package 3 of the EXCELERATE programme,” is, so that a reader unfamiliar with ELIXIR can understand the relevance.

The authors conclude that the process was transparent and fair. Has there been any community-feedback on the process? It would be interesting to know how well-accepted the process has been, and whether there are any suggestions for improvement.

It would be useful to include information about the matching of the EoIs received with the strategic priorities that were identified. Were applications received in all priority areas? Are there areas that
are not yet represented? How do new services that have been included relate to those that were already existing within the node, and also to services provided by other nodes (and was this a consideration in the evaluation process?)

- Is there any plan to support service proposals that were assigned to the roadmap for future inclusion?

**Competing Interests:** I am a member of the ELIXIR Scientific Advisory Board.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

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**Author Response (Member of the F1000 Faculty) 27 Mar 2017**

**John Hancock,** ELIXIR Hub, ELIXIR, UK

In response to this review we have:

- Added a section on the extent to which this approach is generalizable to other nodes, and on whether there are aspects that are unique to the UK node

- Clarified that the ‘services’ that ELIXIR nodes may offer may include any combination of software, data resources and training

- Commented briefly on the long-term evaluation of existing services in order to assess ongoing quality and relevance, and to plan for retirement of services as required. This will rely on regular assessments by our Scientific Development Group and SAB

- Clarified who is responsible for the Node and decisions taken by “the Node” - namely the Node Executive (now renamed as the Management Committee)

- Made the template for Expressions of Interest available as supplementary material

- Expanded briefly on the role and significance of Work Package 3 of the EXCELERATE programme

- Added some comment on community-feedback on the process - we carried out a survey that was supportive although it did suggest two areas for improvement in future: wider advertising and better feedback to proposers

- Included an overview of the matching of the EoIs received with the strategic priorities that were identified

- We also added a discussion of how we intend to support service proposals that were assigned to the roadmap for future inclusion

**Competing Interests:** None
Alfonso Valencia

Life Science Department, Barcelona Supercomputing Centre - Centro Nacional de Supercomputación, Barcelona, Spain

The report describes the process of selection of the UK-ELIXIR xxxx to be presented to the ELIXIR SAB. The report is very informative and being the first node that describes in detail their national process, it has the potential to be very useful for nodes in other countries.

I have a number of suggestions of additional information that is mentioned in the text but not explicitly included.

Composition of the Scientific Development Group (SDG)
A figure with the time line of the process that could be integrated with the Fig. 1.

The template used for the EoIs.
The EoIs submitted by the selected resources (if possible)

I also have a few other questions that may help to clarify specific aspects.

Three training resources were finally selected but in the description of the UK-ELIXIR strategic items training is not described separately (‘Technical infrastructure for interoperability and training including standards). If possible, it may help to clarify what was understood by training in the strategic items and how it is different, or not, of the technical infrastructure.

If it would be possible to give some additional explanation to some of the ‘final set of criteria’ that may really help others. One possible way might be providing examples of answers provided by some of the applications.

It is not very clear how the ‘ELIXIR criteria for the selection of Core Data Resources’ was incorporated in the process. Given the importance of the ELIXIR guidelines for future similar processes this point could be quite relevant.

Finally, even if I realise that this might be considered outside the scope of this paper, what will be really interesting is to include a short explanation of how the selected resources fit each one of the selection criteria, at least at some level of detail.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.
I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response (Member of the F1000 Faculty) 27 Mar 2017

John Hancock, ELIXIR Hub, ELIXIR, UK

In response to this review:

- We note that the composition of the Scientific Development Group is listed in the Acknowledgements
- Revised Figure 1 to put it in the form of a timeline, as requested
- As noted in our response to the first reviewer, we have provided the Eol template as supplementary material
- We cannot make the Eols themselves available as they were provided to us on a confidential basis.
- We have included a description of how training resources were dealt with in the process. As the reviewer notes, some criteria were less applicable to training resources but others remained applicable
- We have included an additional table which summarises how the criteria were interpreted and applied by the SDG during assessment of resources
- Expanded a little on how the 'ELIXIR criteria for the selection of Core Data Resources' were incorporated in the process although this was a relatively informal process

We hope the reviewer will find these changes acceptable.

Competing Interests: None

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Christine Durinx
SIB Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics, Lausanne, Switzerland

The article is clear and well written. The figure and tables support the content.

Some suggestions, mainly to improve clarity:
Introduction

- It would be helpful to mention that the ELIXIR Services can be data resources, tools, and services.
- It is mentioned that the selection process aims to reflect national strengths and priorities in bioinformatics and engage its national community. For readers who are not familiar with the bioinformatics community in the UK, it would be helpful to include a short, general description of the local bioinformatics landscape.

Process overview

- Is "3. Setting up appropriate structures" referring to the Scientific Development Group or does it include other structures?
- Which are the Working Groups that are mentioned in Figure 1 (you mention the Agriculture-related data WG)?

Strategic Prioritization

- When you refer to "ELIXIR-UK", or "discussions within the Node", is this the same as "ELIXIR-UK Executive" in Figure 1 and the Executive Committee (http://www.elixir-uk.org/about-the-node)?

Assessment criteria

- There is a mix here between the criteria for the ELIXIR Services (brought forward by the ELIXIR Nodes through the Service Delivery Plans) and the indicators which have been developed for the ELIXIR Core Data Resources. The latter focus on databases only and therefore won't be very helpful for training (for example). It would be good to make this explicit to avoid any potential confusion.

Results of the assessment

- The list of assessment criteria is long and broad in scope. Is there any way of summarizing on which criteria the UK services are doing particularly well and on which criteria there can be improvement (or that were reasons for not including the services)?
- Table 2: the services that are listed, seem to be UK-only. Certain are however broader collaborations (e.g. Ensembl, TeSS). Could this be made clear?

Future activities and conclusions

- From the text, it seems that ELIXIR-UK is focusing on the identification of the ELIXIR UK Services. Is the UK node offering specific support (or other) to its services?

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

John Hancock, ELIXIR Hub, ELIXIR, UK
In response to this reviewer:

- As also requested by another reviewer we now mention that ELIXIR Services can be data resources, tools, and services
- Included a brief overview of the UK bioinformatics landscape, including its funding landscape
- Clarified the meaning of point 3: "Setting up appropriate structures"; in relation to working groups we only established the Agriscience working group in this round of the process although we might establish others in future
- Clarified (as also raised by another reviewer) that internal discussions within the Node primarily involved the Node Executive
- Clarified the relationship of the assessment criteria to training resources
- Made a brief comment on why some resources were not accepted immediately as Node resources
- Commented on how we treated resources that were international collaborations
- Commented on how we propose to support Node resources in future

We hope these comments are helpful.

**Competing Interests:** None

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