

ClusterXchange pilot scheme - Quality Manual for European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for Excellence (ESCP-4x)

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Introduction

The present Quality Manual builds upon tools and procedures of the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs (EYE) programme. The aim is to outline the main rules and principles of the ClusterXchange pilot scheme to partnerships wishing to apply to the European Cluster Excellence Programme call for proposals (COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02) and to help them to consider important management elements when defining a line of approach regarding its implementation.

The goal of ClusterXchange is to facilitate cross-regional strategic cooperation, learning and networking between Clusters from participating countries¹ through limited periods spent in the host participant's country.

This Quality Manual will be subject to improvements and updates to correspond to the needs of the programme and of the European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for Excellence (ESCP-4x) in charge of its implementation. The financial assistance to third parties, as laid out in Annex 1 of this manual, will however remain stable throughout the entire duration of each project. Therefore, as an ESCP-4x, you will be requested to check and/or contribute to updates on new rules and procedures, in order to provide accurate information to participants and avoid any possible confusion, omissions and/or misunderstandings.

Glossary and definitions

Visiting organisations

Visiting organisations are defined as the travelling party of an exchange. Eligible visiting organisations are²:

- all cluster organisations and business network organisations from COSME participating countries,
- scaling-up support organisations³ from COSME participating countries that are cluster members and
- SMEs from a COSME participating country that are cluster members. It is expected that at least 50% of the supported exchanges shall involve SMEs.

The financial support offered by the ClusterXchange scheme shall be used to cover costs relating for instance to travel and accommodation expenses incurred by the visitor during the stay abroad.

Host organisations

Host organisations are defined as the non-travelling party of an exchange. Eligible host organisations are:

- all cluster organisations and business network organisations from COSME participating countries
- SMEs from a COSME participating country that are cluster members and
- scaling-up support organisations⁴ from COSME participating countries that are cluster members.

¹ The current situation of third countries participation in the COSME programme can be consulted at: http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/initiatives/cosme/index_en.htm

² Eligible participants are defined in Annex 2 - EASME reserves the right to exclude applicants that are not eligible or not in line with the aims of the pilot scheme.

³ Scaling-up support organisations include technology centres, research institutes, fab labs, (digital) innovation hubs, creative hubs, resource-efficiency service providers, incubators and accelerators. They comprise any public or private organisations that is providing access to the testing and validation of technologies and concepts, market intelligence as well as business incubation and acceleration support services in relation to the uptake of advanced technology, digitalisation, new business models, low-carbon and resource-efficient solutions, creativity and design and skills upgrading.

⁴ Scaling-up support organisations include technology centres, research institutes, fab labs, (digital) innovation hubs, creative hubs,

Only in duly justified circumstances and **pre-approved by EASME** on an ad hoc basis, the partnerships may be allowed to deviate from above limitations.

ESCP-4x — European Strategic Cluster Partnership for Excellence

European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for Excellence are officially selected by the Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME) following a call for proposals under the European Cluster Excellence Programme (COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02). Their role is to promote the programme at national or sub-national level, recruit participants, propose matchmaking services and establish successful exchanges between visitors and hosts.

EC — European Commission (Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs)

The ClusterXchange programme is an initiative of the European Union and managed by the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs of the European Commission (DG GROW).

With the entry into force of the Regulation (EU) No 1287/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing a Programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (COSME) (2014-2020) and repealing Decision No 1639/2006/EC, the ClusterXchange programme will be financed under COSME.

DG GROW holds the overall political responsibility for the ClusterXchange programme. The financial and organisational responsibility is with EASME. The Commission makes sure that the necessary funds are available. It raises awareness of the programme, monitors quality of the programme, ensures maintenance and further developments of IT Tools, evaluates the programme and prepares, based on the pilot phase results, for the implementation of the programme on a larger scale, together with the EASME.

EASME - Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

The Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME) has been set-up by the European Commission to manage on its behalf several EU programmes. As an executive agency of the European Commission, the Agency manages significant parts of COSME. It ensures that actions funded under this programme deliver results and provide the Commission with valuable input for its policy tasks. Following the Commission decision to delegate substantial tasks of the programme management under COSME to an executive agency, EASME is responsible for the ClusterXchange programme.

Support Office

The role of the Support Office is to ensure coordination and coherence of activities performed/implemented/managed by the ESCP-4x. It helps them to develop high quality exchanges between participants. Its main tasks are to promote the programme at EU and European level, to provide guidance and support to ESCP-4x, especially in daily operations, monitor activities of the ESCP-4x in the ClusterXchange scheme, manage and develop the website and the IT Matching Tool, develop training material and foster networking/cooperation among ESCP-4x.

Programme overview

The ClusterXchange pilot scheme for clusters is strongly inspired by the successful EYE programme which helps European entrepreneurs enrich their experiences, through learning and networking, and by spending periods of time in enterprises run by experienced entrepreneurs in other countries with the aim to enhance entrepreneurship, notably scaling-up of SMEs, innovation uptake, internationalisation and

resource-efficiency service providers, incubators and accelerators. They comprise any public or private organisations that is providing access to the testing and validation of technologies and concepts, market intelligence as well as business incubation and acceleration support services in relation to the uptake of advanced technology, digitalisation, new business models, low-carbon and resource-efficient solutions, creativity and design and skills upgrading.

competitiveness of new and established micro and small enterprises within the EU and in other participating countries.

The *general objective* of ClusterXchange is to encourage and facilitate transnational, cross-regional, sectoral and cross-sectoral cooperation between clusters and their members to boost their learning and innovation-oriented activities with the view to increase the competitiveness of European SMEs.

The overall action shall foster SME competitiveness and assist companies to successfully access global markets.

The ClusterXchange supports European clusters - and more particularly SMEs and scaling-up support organisations that are members of a cluster - to strengthen their strategic cross-regional collaboration activities by spending periods of time in a partner cluster (or SME/scaling-up support organisation member of a cluster) in another country. The nature of each exchange exercise may follow different specific objectives within a broader approach aiming at the consolidation and/or the creation of new value chains across Europe.

By awarding grants to promote the exchange of cluster members, the EC's *specific objective* is to strengthen strategic interregional collaboration by financially supporting short-term exchanges between clusters with the view to:

1. provide on-the-job-training for visiting participants elsewhere in COSME participating countries in order to facilitate and/or consolidate a successful development of their cluster and explore partnering activities;
2. foster the sharing of experience and information between participating visiting and host organisations on the obstacles and challenges in a pre-identified area;
3. enhance market access and identification of potential partners for new and established cluster organisations/SMEs/technology centres and other scaling-up support organisations in other COSME participating countries;
4. support the networking between clusters from different COSME participating countries by sharing of knowledge and experience; and
5. support activities of ESCP-4x under section 2.2.1. of the European Cluster Excellence Programme call for proposals (COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02).

The implementation of the ClusterXchange should take the following steps into account:

1. Registrations:

Visiting organisations shall register via an online form on the European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP). Host organisations will be identified through their existing and updated ECCP profiles. ClusterXchange is open to cluster organisations, SMEs and Scaling-up support organisations. Each of these categories may apply for an exchange: either as a host organisation or as a visiting organisation.

Host organisations: priority shall be given to cluster organisations, their scaling-up support organisations and SME members. Only in duly justified circumstances and **pre-approved by EASME** on an ad hoc basis, the partnerships may be allowed to deviate from these limitations.

Visiting organisations: strictly reserved for cluster organisations, SMEs and scaling-up support organisations that are members of a cluster. The concerned cluster organisation must be registered and have an active profile on the ECCP.

When applying, a visiting organisation must select a specific ESCP-4x who will manage the request for participation in the programme. Selection of an ESCP-4x shall be based on sector(s) covered by the ESCP-4x and/or geographical location of the ESCP-4x members.

2. Assessment of requests: Relevant ESCP-4x shall receive through the IT Matching Tool⁵ the request for assessment and checking the eligibility of candidates.

3. Matching steps: Once eligibility criteria are fulfilled, access to the catalogue of potential ClusterXchange partners shall be granted to participants and the matching step may then follow two options:

a) Participants (host organisation or visiting organisation) identify a relevant partner and establish contacts directly through the IT Matching Tool, or

b) Matching will be based upon search through the online catalogue with the support of the relevant ESCP-4x.

4. Preparing the exchange: Once visiting and host organisations are matched, the exchange shall be built between participants with the support of the relevant ESCP-4x. This phase will focus on preparatory work in view of point 5.

5. Shaping the exchange: Participants (host and visiting organisations) reach an agreement between them about the work and collaboration project (i.e. about the dates, objectives, roadmap and action plan of the stay) and submit the details to the relevant ESCP-4x (being their contact point before, during and after the exchange).

6. Validation of the preparatory work by relevant ESCP-4x.

It is important to keep in mind that the programme does not support internships or work placements - only capacity-building, business- and innovation oriented collaboration exchanges between clusters, in line with the objectives mentioned above.

7. Signature of a Commitment to Quality: a Commitment to Quality should be signed by all partners involved in the exchange and uploaded in the IT Matching Tool⁶. Visiting organisations should also conclude the financial agreement with the relevant ESCP-4x.

8. Start of the stay abroad: The duration of the exchange may be from three working days (excluding travel time) to one month.

9. The financial assistance to the visiting organisation will be provided in one payment after the exchange has taken place and upon completion of relevant closing reports, and reception of other relevant evidence that the exchange has taken place, if necessary.

IMPORTANT:

Each eligible organisation may benefit from the pilot scheme only once as a *visiting* organisation.

Taking into account that the participation in this pilot scheme will not be limited to the direct beneficiaries of the ESCP-4x, it is expected that a minimum of 25% of exchanges are by participants not being part of an ESCP-4x.

Host organisations, on the other hand, can host more than one visitor (simultaneously or at different times).

⁵ The IT Matching Tool will be made available in due time.

⁶ Or digitally signed in the IT Matching Tool when this option will be available.

Programme benefits

Like Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, the ClusterXchange programme is about breaking barriers and partnering beyond borders: national borders should not curtail potential of clusters and their members, in particular SMEs. On the contrary, the internal market is a great opportunity for SMEs. They should make use of it since it allows them to grow and create jobs. This approach is particularly valuable in times of economic crisis and market fragmentation because a dynamic and innovative business community is a pre-requisite to recovery. ClusterXchange shall contribute to fostering a collaborative and innovative mindset and behaviour. It fosters development of more internationalised SMEs supported by strong and more world-class clusters across Europe. This will promote sustainable economic development and will benefit all EU countries.

1. Benefits for visiting Organisations

The programme will bring the following benefits to visiting parties, in order to meet their specific objectives:

- Up to one month staying abroad with a selected partner in another participating country, in order to gain the relevant knowledge in various areas (e.g. financial and operational management, development of innovative products and services, branding and marketing practices, and effective planning);
- Refinement of business ideas/plans;
- Broadening network of contacts;
- Gaining knowledge about foreign markets and facilitate access to them;
- Development of potential new cross-border business opportunities and partnerships;
- Support activities linked to the implementation of activities as described in section 2.2.1 of the European Cluster Excellence Programme call for proposals (COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02);
- Gaining insights into a different cultural and organisational setting/workplace and understanding how a cluster organisation and/or a company operates in another participating country;
- Possibility of finding out about:
 - European commercial law and the single European market,
 - European standardisation,
 - European support for SMEs.
- Improvement of language skills (secondary benefit);
- Participation in Alumni Network.

2. Benefits for host Organisations

Given the fact that no financial support is provided to hosts, motivating them to participate in the programme may be the most challenging aspect of the project. Therefore, particular attention should be given to promoting benefits to host organisations within the programme.

Potential benefits include the opportunity to:

- Build or consolidate a serious and sustainable collaboration with a partner from another participating country. This collaboration could contribute to their activity development through innovative ideas and views;
- Support activities linked to the implementation of activities as described in section 2.2.1 of the European Cluster Excellence Programme call for proposals (COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02);
- Gain knowledge about the visitor's domestic markets — including business contacts — and opportunities to internationalise their business;

- Interact with hosts from other participating countries and become part of a dynamic network of clusters or benefit from it if the host is not a cluster organisation;
- Improve professionalization and/or growth of their organisation and opportunity to establish a new business partnership directly with a partner from another country;
- Increase visibility and prestige of the cluster through press coverage (i.e. press articles, interviews, etc.);
- Benefit from assistance provided by ESCP-4x in the search for a potential exchange partner and the support of the exchange with a visitor;
- Access new skills and innovative knowledge provided by a visitor that does not exist in the host organisation;
- Improvement of language skills;
- Participation in Alumni Network.

1.Promotion, outreach and registration

1.1 Promoting the ClusterXchange

The programme will be run for the first time in a pilot phase under the COSME Work Programme 2018⁷. It is therefore important to put efforts in promotional activities and support in order to ensure success and further expansion, since raising awareness of the programme's existence and benefits is fundamental to reaching out to potential participants of the scheme and the establishment of successful exchanges.

Planning promotion

The promotional activities, coordinated by the Support Office, ensure a common visual identity for the programme via a variety of promotional material in collaboration with the ESCP-4x responsible for the implementation of the scheme.

Based on the material offered by the Support Office, **each ESCP-4x is responsible for planning its own dissemination strategy for the programme in order to achieve its goals, as described in the grant agreement signed with EASME.**

The Support Office does not intervene in the promotional strategy implemented by the ESCP-4x but provides each ESCP-4x with media kits during the implementation phase in order to prepare press campaigns.

IMPORTANT:

Any form of promotion and publicity must make the EU co-financing for the project clearly visible. The applicants will at least include a link to the European Cluster Collaboration Platform's dedicated web section on their respective websites, and the European Union logo in their communication tools for the programme. Other means of awareness-raising are also encouraged. For more details how to use the EU logo please refer to: <https://ec.europa.eu/easme/en/communication-toolkit>

There should be no misleading visual identity elements that could cause confusion on the origin of the promotional material, such as using the EC's logo. The EC's logo can be used only for documents produced by the EC, not the ESCP-4x.

ESCP-4x will also ensure that they always use the correct title for the scheme, which is "ClusterXchange".

⁷ See Commission implementing decision C(2018) 6983 final - <http://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/32281>

1.1.1. Promotional strategies

Promotional activities in the programme might often seem straightforward but experience, notably from the EYE programme, has shown that intermediary organisations (in this case ESCP-4x) have to put substantial amount of effort in promoting the programme and recruiting participants in view of quality exchanges.

The strategic importance of a solid promotional strategy should therefore not be underestimated, especially as strong promotional activities can play a crucial role in identifying suitable profiles and establishing successful matches. It is particularly important that ESCP-4x focus their promotional efforts on targeting the right participants in order to maximise the benefits of the programme and to reduce the risk of attracting applicants who may wish to misuse the programme.

Even though the recruitment of visitors seems relatively easy, the promotion towards this target group may constitute an important part of raising awareness about the programme.

Motivating hosts to participate in the programme, however, may require additional effort and consideration. Promotional activities should be focused on their **real needs** and on how the programme can benefit them — by highlighting the competences and skills that visitors can offer to host organisations and the increased visibility for their activities. When preparing their recruitment strategy, ESCP-4x should bear in mind the specificities of this target audience, which may be different from those of visitors.

Example from the EYE programme: What works in the case of host Entrepreneurs?

- Direct contact — telesales campaign to businesses, visits, face-to-face meetings, info days, etc.;
- Success stories/testimonies — concrete examples of benefits gained by previous host Entrepreneurs;
- Media coverage of completed exchanges (press articles, press conferences, TV and radio interviews);
- Social/professional networks (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook) can help to find host Entrepreneurs;
- Offering assistance and support — often host Entrepreneurs do not have much time and/or a good command of English to complete the online registration form and manage the IT tool: they usually appreciate help with administrative issues (e.g. help with completing their application, etc.).

1.1.2. Promotional material available and recommended communication methods

You are strongly encouraged to use the press and communication tools that will be developed and made available by the Support Office.

A wide variety of dissemination methods exists and it is essential to select the one(s) which will allow you to communicate the right message(s) to the right target audience and therefore achieve your objectives. The table in Annex 3 summarises the methods recommended by the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs Support Office, EASME and the EC. The list is not exhaustive.

ESCP-4x should plan sufficient budget to cover their needs of promotional material and promotional items.

Services provided by the Support office shall include the following:

- a) Overall Promotion and Communication Strategy
 - Press communication – which must be complementary to the promotional activities of the EC and of ESCP-4x;
 - Identification of high impact events and participation of the Support Office (keynote speaker/panels);

- Assisting the EASME and the EC and ESCP-4x regarding other relevant events where participation of the EC (EU level) or of ESCP-4x (national level) is deemed beneficial;
- Providing input (in form of templates etc.) and assistance for communication activities of ESCP-4x on national, regional and local level;
- Preparation and execution of a European-wide press/media campaign in coordination with ESCP-4x (optional);
- Production of Newsletters (3 per year) on topics of general interest for the ESCP-4x.

b) Promotional Material

The Support Office shall design and make available new promotional material including but not limited to:

- A visual identity;
- Brochures/leaflets/videos with general information on ClusterXchange pilot scheme;
- Brochures to 'attract' (host and visitor) participants;
- Identifying suitable success stories from the programme and producing a success story video (1 per year);
- Success stories guidelines and templates for ESCP-4x;
- ClusterXchange pilot scheme presentation video with interviews of relevant stakeholders (e.g. EC, EASME, ESCP-4x, participating hosts and visitors);
- Press release template for ESCP-4x;
- Press Packs for promotional activities of ESCP-4x, Support Office etc., including regularly updated statistics and fact sheets about the ClusterXchange pilot scheme.

ESCP-4x can develop their own promotional materials in line with the visual rules of the ClusterXchange pilot scheme.

1.1.3. Promoting the programme via social networks

Through the proper use of social media, ESCP-4x can achieve the following objectives:

- Strengthen programme visibility;
- Connect participants;
- Improve matching rate.

Statistics from previous EYE programme cycles show that in 2016, 17% of participating entrepreneurs had learned about, and applied to the programme thanks to social media.

The Support Office shall act as a Community Manager in charge of animating, moderating and bringing relevant content to the relevant communities. ESCP-4x are encouraged to be ambassadors of the ClusterXchange pilot scheme on social media, by connecting with the Support Office's main accounts, posting content to the Support Office accounts and by tagging the relevant social media accounts.

ESCP-4x are also invited to share relevant information on events, promotional activities, success stories, etc. with the Support Office so it can share this information via the programme's social media channel⁸.

IMPORTANT:

Promotion is crucial as it will help you increase number of participation registrations. It is therefore strongly recommended that you dedicate time to this important activity. It is also recommended to inform potential participants on respective responsibilities of visitors and hosts in the programme well in advance in order to avoid last-minute cancellation.

⁸ All relevant social media accounts will be communicated by the Support Office at the beginning of the implementation phase of ClusterXchange.

1.2 Outreach

Each ESCP-4x is free to implement its own outreach strategy in accordance with the ClusterXchange pilot scheme's policies and rules, and grant agreement signed with EASME. Promotional material and media kits are provided to support your communication and outreach activities. Every effort will be made to ensure that information contained in promotional materials is up-to-date and accurate at the time of going to press. The Support Office — on the basis of a formal request — shall provide ESCP-4x with the latest statistics about the programme.

1.3 Registration

The ClusterXchange pilot scheme shall be run as part of the "European Cluster Excellence Programme" call for proposals (COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02) and therefore the ClusterXchange pilot scheme shall be implemented within the duration of the grant agreement period. This may include a preparation phase⁹ not longer than six months during which only prospecting and upstream activities would take place (e.g. outreach and communication activities, pre-match between potential participants, etc.).

1.3.1 Eligibility criteria

To participate in the programme, participants must comply with the eligibility criteria established by the programme and submit their applications via the online registration form which will be made available on the programme website¹⁰.

Applicants not fulfilling the eligibility criteria must not be accepted in the programme. Reasons for rejection might be incomplete applications or missing compulsory elements, geographic ineligibility etc.

Participants are responsible for submitting complete, comprehensive and accurate data and your responsibility is to assess applications in line with the eligibility criteria described in this section and make sure that their profiles meet the criteria. When in doubt, you should request for additional proof/piece of information that you may consider needed.

The EC and EASME reserve the right to exclude applicants that are not eligible or not in line with the aims of the programme.

1.3.1.1 Legal criteria¹¹

Visitor definition

Eligible visiting organisations are:

- a) all cluster organisations¹² and business network organisations from COSME participating countries**
- b) SMEs from a COSME participating country that are cluster members**

⁹ During the preparation phase, implementation of exchange requests may be postponed until the implementation phase.

¹⁰ The ClusterXchange website will be hosted under the [European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#).

¹¹ A summary of definitions of entities can be found in Annex 2

¹² 'Innovation clusters' are defined in the Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation (2014/C 198/01) as "structures or organised groups of independent parties (such as innovative start-ups, small, medium and large enterprises, as well as research and knowledge dissemination organisations, non-for-profit organisations and other related economic actors) designed to stimulate innovative activity by promoting sharing of facilities and exchange of knowledge and expertise and by contributing effectively to knowledge transfer, networking, information dissemination and collaboration among the undertakings and other organisations in the cluster".

The European Union’s SME definition

The European Union defines SMEs as enterprises which: *‘fulfil the criteria laid down in the Recommendation as summarised in the table below. Besides the staff headcount ceiling, an enterprise will also qualify as an SME if it meets either the turnover ceiling or the balance sheet ceiling, but not necessarily both’.*

Specific rules are applicable when calculating ceilings for enterprises which are not autonomous (partner or linked enterprises) and for publicly owned enterprises, which do not qualify as SMEs.

You will find further information about the EU’s SME definition at: http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition_en

The SME definition document includes a model declaration that can be requested for enterprises whose qualification as SME is not clear.

Enterprise category	Head count	Turnover	Or Balance sheet total
Small and medium-sized	< 250	< € 50 million	< € 43 million

c) Scaling-up support organisations from COSME participating countries that are cluster members

Scaling-up support organisations include scaling-up support organisations¹³, research institutes, fab labs, (digital) innovation hubs¹⁴, creative hubs, resource-efficiency service providers¹⁵, incubators and accelerators. They comprise any public or private organisation that is providing access to the testing and validation of technologies and concepts, market intelligence as well as business incubation and acceleration support services in relation to the uptake of advanced technology, digitalisation, new business models, low-carbon and resource-efficient solutions, creativity and design and skills upgrading.

Each eligible organisation may benefit from the pilot scheme only once as a *visiting* organisation.

The amount of financial support per third party (visiting organisation) must not exceed EUR 1100.

Host definition

Host organisations are, in priority, organisations described above under a), b) and c) above.

However, under specific and justified circumstances, **non-priority** host organisations may be identified among organisations that are from the same type as organisations under b) and c) but **are not** cluster members. This will be accepted following a case-by-case assessment and **pre-approval of EASME**.

These circumstances may be, for instance:

- At month 12 of the implementation of the grant period, the partnership foresees difficulties in reaching

¹³ Numerous terms are used for “technology centres”, such as innovation centres, science parks, technology parks, fab labs, co-working centres and so on. See also European Commission (2014) Setting up, managing and evaluation EU Science and Technology Parks: An advice and guidance report on good practice, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/studies/pdf/stp_report_en.pdf. The European Commission has defined and mapped *technology centres* that provide services to SMEs to innovate with Key Enabling Technologies (KETs) as any public or private organisation capable of delivering research and innovation close-to-market services to SMEs from Technological Readiness Level (TRL) 3 to 8, but with at least one TRL >5. See <https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/kets-tools/kets-tc/map>. For an explanation of TRL, see https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2014_2015/annexes/h2020-wp1415-annex-g-trl_en.pdf

¹⁴ Digital Innovation Hubs act as one-stop-shops where companies –especially SMEs, startups and mid-caps– can get access to technology-testing, financing advice, market intelligence and networking opportunities in relation to digital transformation and uptake of digital technologies. See also <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/digital-innovation-hubs> and <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/digital-innovation-hubs-tool>

¹⁵ <https://www.resourceefficient.eu/en/support-organisations>

the number of exchanges target;

- An exchange with a specific scaling-up support organisations that offers specific services that cannot be provided by a cluster.

Minimum age definition

All participants must be minimum 18 years old in order to have the legal capacity to sign agreements and to participate.

1.3.1.2. Geographical criteria

The rule

Interested participants must have their '**permanent residence**', as defined by the programme, in an **EU Member State or in any of the other participating countries** to participate in the programme.

While implementing the ClustersXchange programme, ESCP-4x shall give priority to exchanges covering a distance longer than 200 kilometres between visiting and host organisations.

'**Permanent residence**' is defined as:

- The place where the organisation of the applicant is registered;
- If an organisation has several registered establishments in different EU Member States or other participating countries, the participant should choose the country where he/she is based as his/her permanent residence.

Participation in the programme is not based on nationality or legal residence, therefore holding a specific nationality or legal residence status does not grant or deny an applicant the right to participate in the programme.

Third country nationals

Representatives of eligible organisations who are not nationals of an EU Member State or of any of the participating countries can participate in the programme provided that they have spent 183 days in a participating country with a residence permit or equivalent document that allows them to reside in the country, and that they have started or have the intention to start a business in the EU or any other participating country. If this condition is not fulfilled, they cannot participate in the programme.

Representatives of visiting organisations in an exchange must ensure that they are allowed to stay in the host organisation's country and should themselves take care of complying with procedures linked to their visa/residence permit, where needed.

EU outermost regions and Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs)

Participants coming from or travelling to an outermost region, referred to in Article 349 TFEU¹⁶, or an OCT in the frame of the programme, will receive the maximum monthly allowance to cover the extra costs incurred.

1.3.2 Assessment of applications

Applicants should be assessed solely on the basis of the established eligibility criteria (see point 1.3.1), regardless of gender, ethnic background, age, religion, sexual orientation or any other irrelevant

¹⁶ Article 349 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (therein Part 7 - General and Final Provisions) refers to the structural social and economic situation of Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, Réunion, Saint-Barthélemy, Saint-Martin, the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Island (the EU's outermost regions).

distinction¹⁷.

Assessment of applications is a key step in the process of finding the best possible matches, as it determines quality of the profiles for an exchange. You are responsible for checking quality of applications submitted and you must ensure that only quality profiles of participants are accepted in the programme.

During the assessment, particular attention should be paid to participants' expressed interests, motivation and commitment through a concrete roadmap proposal for the exchange.

To ensure that there is no misuse of the programme and/or there is no case of "stolen" identity, ESCP-4x should verify the identity of the applicants by the appropriate means (copy of ID/passport, as well as in-person or Skype interview). All applicants should also be contacted by phone before they are assessed and a decision is taken on their applications.

IMPORTANT:

Please note that ESCP-4x are not allowed to impose additional eligibility criteria that are not specifically outlined in the programme.

ESCP-4x are empowered by the programme to decide on the eligibility and suitability of an applicant to participate in the programme and thus whether he/she can be accepted or not. Note, however, that such decisions must be based on objective assessment and ESCP-4x must be able to objectively justify it in the event of a complaint from an applicant or participant during a check by the EC/EASME/Support Office (see also section 2.5 Random checks by the EC/EASME).

1.3.2.1 Responsibilities of Participants

Responsibilities of participants at the time of application are as follows:

- To carefully read the supporting documents published on the Support Office website (User guide, Registration guides, etc.) and comply with the programme rules and procedures;
- To apply for the programme via the online registration form;
- To provide any additional information (documents/evidences) to the selected ESCP-4x when requested;
- To inform the selected ESCP-4x about any change that may affect their participation in the programme.
- Host organisations are also responsible to ensure proper working environment for visitors during the exchange (i.e. provide suitable working space and necessary equipment and tools) and must demonstrate this at the time of applying by providing relevant declaration.

1.3.2.2 Responsibilities of European Strategic Cluster Partnerships

Your responsibilities as ESCP-4x are to:

- Inform participants about the programme rules and procedures, notably the minimum quality standards defined in this document applicable to participants in the scheme;
- Provide help and assistance during the registration process;
- Ideally meet with applicants in person or at least via video call (this could help prevent potential fraud);
- Liaise with participants to obtain feedback on information that is lacking in their applications;
- Respect application processing deadlines set by the Support Office. The set deadlines will be reasonable and will be reflected in the IT tool, including payments; monitor pending applications for smooth running of the process;
- Not refuse applications from applicants if they select a wrong ESCP-4x but redirect them to another ESCP-4x if relevant;

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/justice-and-fundamental-rights/data-protection/2018-reform-eu-data-protection-rules_en

- Make sure that all accepted applications are eligible, complete and accurate;
- Look proactively for appropriate matches for participants;
- Verify quality of exchanges, including eligibility and quality of counterpart of the exchange.

1.3.2.3. Assessing visitor applications¹⁸

a) **Minimum quality standards**

Based on the EYE programme, the following minimum quality standards are to be fulfilled when assessing the application of a potential visitor:

1. **Check that the eligibility criteria are met (see point 1.3.1)**

IMPORTANT:

Once accepted in the IT tool, participants are directly available for matching. In case of doubt about the eligibility of an applicant, the application should be put on hold with adequate communication to the applicant. The ESCP-4x has to provide elements to support the decision in such cases.

2. **Motivation and expectations should be clearly expressed**

Success of the programme will depend upon it being seen as a **meaningful investment for both sides**, and NOT a student learning opportunity or internship abroad. Therefore, both parties and more particularly Visitors should know exactly what they want to 'get out' of the exchange at the time they register.

Visiting organisations should in particular demonstrate:

- A real commitment to invest in an exchange that will add value to the organisation's business or cooperation idea;
- The demonstration of a clear and serious motivation for the exchange supported by concrete elements if possible (e.g. documented identification of needs, roadmap, action plan, etc.)
- A commitment to contribute to the development of the host's organisation through innovative ideas and by making use of his/her skills and competences where relevant;
- Motivation, enthusiasm, seriousness, creativity and initiative.

Visiting organisations should furthermore be able and willing to compensate for additional funds needed to cover costs of their stay abroad in case they exceed the EU's contribution.

IMPORTANT: It is in everybody's best interest to ensure quality assessments. It is highly recommended to document assessments as much as possible in the IT Tool for future reference¹⁹.

3. **A sound personal and vocational background**

Beyond the organisation's scope for cooperation, emphasis should also be placed on participants' **qualifications, competences and interpersonal skills**, in particular in exchanges targeting cluster management skills.

The Europass CV²⁰ format is preferable, but **not compulsory**. **CVs can be submitted in any official language of the EU**; however, **English** is preferable as it is the exclusive language used in the online database and consequently facilitates matchmaking and approval²¹.

¹⁸ Relevant check-list will be provided by the Support Office.

¹⁹ An IT tool manual will be made available by the Support Office, including description and guidance on the tool usage as well as relevant workflows, etc.

²⁰ <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/documents/curriculum-vitae>

²¹ ESCP-4x should take into account that documents submitted in languages other than English might add delays to the possible approval procedure.

4. A well formulated exchange project

The project description should at least contain:

- A clear description of the objective(s) of the cooperation;
- An assessment and analysis of needs and benefits to be obtained through the implementation of the experience;
- An action plan and roadmap, including the post-exchange period (mid- and long-term).

IMPORTANT: The action plan (objectives and indicators) and roadmap (implementation steps) shall be compulsory documents that forms part of the application profile.

5. Ability to work in a foreign language

Applicants are allowed to submit their application in any of the official EU languages, providing that this language is also spoken and understood by their selected ESCP-4x.

Yet, the ability of a visitor and a host to communicate properly is crucial to the success of an exchange and it is therefore vital to ensure that accepted participants master the necessary foreign language(s).

Given that no language training is provided as part of the programme and that language skills are one of the main criteria for matching, it is important to ensure that participants can comfortably work in the foreign languages they select in the application form (i.e. they do not have difficulties to understand, speak, read and — if needed — write in the language(s)).

Although there are no specific language level requirements at this point, it is recommended that visitors have a strong English or master a second language (at least B2 level²²) in addition to their mother tongue.

IMPORTANT: English is not mandatory as long as the respective ESCP-4x, host and visitor can fluently speak the same language.

b) Selection of a European Strategic Cluster Partnership

As part of their registration, applicants have to choose an ESCP-4x that has been selected by the EASME to manage applications, establish exchanges and provide guidance and support. The selection of an ESCP-4x should be based on geographical and/or sectoral preferences. If no ESCP-4x is selected, the IT Matching Tool will attribute the exchange request to an ESCP-4x based on the comparative number of exchanges performed by ESCP-4x (i.e. the exchange will be attributed to the ESCP-4x having the lower number of ongoing and finalised exchanges).

Other important elements

The following elements, which do not need any quality check, are important for the matchmaking exercise and need to be taken into consideration:

- Exchange period,
- Sector of interest,
- Geographical preferences.

These factors are crucial in the matching process.

A **registration guide for participants (visitors and hosts)** will be developed by the Support Office to help them during the registration procedure. You are strongly encouraged to recommend your applicants

²² <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale>

to carefully read this guide as it provides useful information on the type and level of details that should be submitted.

The registration guide will be made available on the Support Office's website.

1.3.2.4 Assessing host applications

a) Minimum quality standards

Please find below the minimum quality standards you must take into account when assessing the application from a host organisation:

1. Check that eligibility criteria are met (see point 1.3.1)

Please refer to the table of entities eligible for the programme in Annex 2.

The host's contact details should be individual (i.e. individual work email, direct phone number and address) and not that of another person.

2. Motivation and expectations should be clearly expressed

Interested hosts should explain their individual interest in participating in the ClusterXchange programme and what they can offer to a visitor.

More specifically, they should demonstrate that:

- They have experience in cooperating successfully with other organisations (within and/or beyond their regional area);
- They are engaged in an activity that will give a visitor relevant learning and/or cooperation opportunities;
- They want to share their experience and, in case of an exchange oriented on learning and skills, act as a mentor: they should specify how they will work with the visitor towards developing his/her skills and know-how. This is **a personal commitment that cannot be delegated.**

Examples of activities during the exchange:

- Joint Market research and developing new business opportunities;
- Project development, innovation and R&D;
- Taking a fresh look at existing business operations;
- Understanding SME finance;
- Branding, sales and marketing of cluster or company;
- Work on concrete projects in one or more of the above mentioned areas;
- Job-shadowing;
- Individual or grouped training activities (e.g. a host organisation could take benefit of ClusterXchange to invite simultaneously several visiting organisations in view of a grouped training session with a professional trainer or expert. This will allow sharing of costs and further networking among participants).

3. Brief curriculum vitae

Only a manager of an organisation or a person directly involved in the management of the organisation with the right decision level should apply to the programme as a host organisation. As the application is done on a personal basis (and not on a company basis) and commits the manager personally, the application should not be delegated to an employee (e.g. secretary, assistant, or other).

A brief CV including a description of the host's profile, professional experience and job position should be required, with clear dates and location for each experience.

CVs can be submitted in any official language of the participating countries. However, it is likely that English is understood by most users of the online database that contains all accepted applications and, consequently, might be the most appropriate language for allowing ESCP-4x to perform matchmaking.

IMPORTANT: An organisation description is not a CV. Experience of the host, whether in the present company or in a previous one, and other relevant personal characteristics are very important. Professional experience and job position of the host should be clearly stated. Nevertheless, information about key features of the hosting organisation must be available to help the potential visitor to decide on the choice of a host.

b) Selection of European Strategic Cluster Partnership

As part of their registration, applicants have to choose a European Strategic Cluster Partnership (ESCP4x) that is selected by the EASME to manage applications, establish exchanges and provide guidance and support.

a) Other important elements

In addition to the above minimum quality standards, there are other elements which do not need any quality check but are, nevertheless, important for matchmaking. These need to be taken into consideration and are comprised of:

- Host's preferred countries of origin regarding the visitor;
- Time availability and preferred dates for the exchange: this data is crucial for the host;
- Additional important information reported by hosts in their application that could make their offer more attractive (e.g. accommodation, insurance, etc.).

b) Assistance

Hosts will often be very active managers or staff in similar position with a tight schedule and little time for extensive formalities. Therefore, ESCP-4x are strongly encouraged to assist hosts in the registration process to the greatest extent possible, without taking over the host's responsibilities in the programme. Hosts might also require further assistance from their respective ESCP-4x when searching for an appropriate exchange partner. Again, advice and guidance are crucial for the success of matchmaking.

A **registration guide for host organisations** will be made available by the Support Office to help them during the registration process. ESCP-4x are encouraged to recommend to their applicants to carefully read this guide in order to have all the required information at hand before starting the registration process.

It is important to make an accurate assessment of potential hosts because the success of an exchange is, to a large extent, determined by the motivation and seriousness of hosts. In case of doubt, you are advised to put the application on hold and ask hosts for improvements of their application or additional evidence.

IMPORTANT: If the application file of an applicant is not clear, ESCP-4x should seek advice from the Support Office and explain the situation with all necessary information.

1.3.2.5. *Exclusion criteria*

The criteria for exclusion shall be as follows:

- Applicants do not comply with the eligibility criteria described above;
- Applicants who are trying to misuse financial assistance for various reasons²³;
- Applicants who are looking for free labour force or pure internships;
- Weak/poor applications which can obviously not be improved;
- Applicants having already benefitted from the ClusterXchange as a visiting organisation applying to be a visiting organisation again.

1.4 IT Matching tool

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform²⁴ will develop an online IT Matching Tool that will build upon the European Cluster Collaboration Platform database.

This new tool will enable applicants to submit applications to ClusterXchange, search for an exchange partner, perform matchmakings, and follow exchanges. A specific access to this online tool shall be granted to all consortium partners of an ESCP-4x with the view to implement the ClusterXchange programme.

It is to be noted that, once it is fully operational, the IT Matching Tool shall be the **only** entry point for applications and administration of the scheme. Exchanges having taken place before that moment shall be the object of an a posteriori encoding in the IT tool by the relevant ESCP-4x (i.e. the ESCP-4x that has paid the lump sum to the visitor).

The IT Matching Tool, that will be hosted under the ECCP, shall allow ESCP-4x to easily monitor and treat all incoming requests assigned to them in a timely manner as well as providing specific support to ESCP-4x in the following steps:

- a) Application processing,
- b) Search/Match,
- c) Exchange building between participants,
- d) Exchange execution (stay abroad period),
- h) Post-exchange reporting and final validation process of an exchange.

ESCP-4x are required to contribute to the setting up of the IT Matching Tool before its final release. This can be achieved by means of expression of needs, feedback on beta versions of the tool, suggestions for improvement, etc. The Support Office will manage the consultation process.

1.5 Support Office

The core task of the Support Office will be to work and coordinate with all ESCP-4x on a daily basis as

²³ E.g. to extend an existing internship or after study stay in another country, to carry out a franchising training at the franchisor's premises, etc.

²⁴ See Commission implementing decision C(2018) 6983 final - <http://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/32281>

well as to contribute to promotion and communication activities relating to the scheme.

Besides communication activities as described above, the Support Office operational support include:

- a) Daily Support and Guidance to ESCP-4x (Help Desk);
- b) Monitoring of exchanges and their status (Registration, building exchanges, preparation, implementation and follow-up of exchanges, random checks);
- c) "ESCP-4x Network" Webinars;
- d) ECCP web section management.

a) Daily Support and Guidance to ESCP-4x (Help Desk)

The Support Office will be fully responsible for the ClusterXchange day-to-day support to ESCP-4x via written, phone, face-to-face and any other suitable mean of communication.

Daily support includes, among others, the following activities:

- Help Desk for any arising questions in a timely manner (replies and initiation of actions, ideally within 24 hours following the request);
- Drafting of answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and compilation and updating of FAQs to be published on the programme website section;
- Creation of Webinar Sessions with different programme related topics (e.g. "How to recruit the best participant (host and visitor)", "How to improve the quality of the applications", etc.) to be recorded and published on the programme website;
- Propose how new and underperforming ESCP-4x will be coached and trained;
- Assistance and training regarding the IT Tool;
- Assistance with the daily implementation of the Programme (e.g. provision of relevant detailed procedures, questions regarding the eligibility of participants, the financial assistance to be paid to visitors; problems relating to ongoing exchanges);
- Assistance with the promotion of the Programme on national level (see Promotion and Communication Strategy);
- Reassignment of 'floating' participants (i.e. participants not having an assigned ESCP-4x) and other means of problem solving which may arise in the course of the exchange/project;
- Conduction of satisfaction surveys among participants, including ESCP-4x.

b) Monitoring

The IT tool shall provide relevant functionalities to allow ESCP-4x to regularly monitor and follow-up on outstanding actions (e.g. delays in accepting registered participants; delays in approving proposed exchanges; delays in finalising the feedback questionnaire).

The Support Office is expected to take part in every review meeting that will take place with the EASME /EC services and the ESCP-4x coordinators.

c) Network Webinars

The Support Office shall organise regular webinars to the attention of ESCP-4x. These Networking sessions will be designed to provide opportunities for the ESCP-4x to get to know each other, to exchange experience and best practices, to obtain more guidance on critical strategic and other issues and on new aspects of the programme and to offer further possibilities to match participant profiles. At the same time, they will allow ESCP-4x to ask concrete questions about the implementation of the Programme to the Support Office and EASME/EC.

To this end, the Support Office shall be responsible for the following issues:

- Organisation of the webinar;
- Drafting of the agenda;
- Sending out invitations to ESCP-4x and corresponding follow-up (for instance if one of the ESCP-4x is asked to give a presentation at the Network Webinar);
- Presentation on the current status of the Programme and any other relevant issues (depending on the agenda);
- Chairing of the Q&A session in cooperation with the EASME and the EC.
- Implementation and analyses of participants feedback questionnaire.

d) ECCP web section Management

The Support Office will be in charge of managing, updating and improving the dedicated ECCP web section on the programme and will ensure that the website is continuously operational.

This task includes the following actions:

- Produce and upload new success stories and social media videos;
- Produce, update and upload promotional material;
- Produce, update and upload other relevant documents, including the Quality Manual;
- Produce, update and upload templates for reports;
- Produce, update and upload FAQs and Press Room;
- Management of a "ESCP-4x Corner", including information related to "ESCP-4x Network" webinars (e.g. overview of upcoming sessions; agenda, preparatory material before each session; proceedings, presentations, action list if relevant after each session), news section, photo gallery, etc.
- Define and implement actions for continuous improvement of the ECCP web section (e.g. improve the user-friendliness and the visual appeal of the ECCP Web Section).

1.6 Data protection

It is forbidden to disclose any kind of personal data (e.g. contact details, CVs, etc.) of the registered applicants to third parties without their explicit agreement.

European Strategic Cluster Partnerships should ensure that they comply with all European and national data protection rules – see section 15 Data Protection of the European Cluster Excellence Programme call for proposals (COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02).

2. Building exchanges

The programme defines the stays abroad as a temporary exchange between a visiting organisation and a host organisation — each belonging to a **different participating country**. Such an exchange is meant to be a period of collaboration founded upon mutual interests and benefits. An eligible exchange will involve a stay of the visitor with the host for a period of time between three working days (excluding travel time) to one month. The total length of the matchmaking process may be time consuming and may take several weeks. Therefore, it is essential that such time span is taken into account when initiating an exchange (especially regarding the planned start date) and that participants are duly informed in order to avoid any possible disappointment, postponement or cancellation of exchanges.

2.1 The IT Matching Tool — online catalogue

Accepted applications shall be shown in an online catalogue to be developed as part of the IT Matching Tool which shall allow all ESCP-4x to search for matches. Approved participants can also search in the online database for appropriate partners and make suggestions to their ESCP-4x or propose matches directly to their counterpart.

The IT Matching Tool will allow automatic matching in order to instantly find the closest fitting counterparts for a potential exchange. Matching possibilities shall be calculated based on similarity between the answers provided by visiting organisation to key questions in the application form and the answers submitted by host organisations present in the catalogue (and vice-versa).

The catalogue will not be public. It will be accessible to ESCP-4x and accepted participants only.

Please note that the EC, EASME and the Support Office are able to see all profile information provided by participants.

The data in the IT Matching Tool will be kept for 5 years.

2.2 Search and match

The process of successfully matching a host and a visitor is a key element of the ClusterXchange programme.

Searching and matching is the process whereby information submitted by a visitor in the catalogue is compared to information provided by a host (and vice-versa) in order to find the closest possible match for an exchange.

The process shall consider in priority exchange requests matching on the following criteria:

- Targeted participants to the exchange;
- Duration of the exchange;
- Sector of interest;
- Geographical preference;
- Reversed exchange²⁵.

A suitable partner for visitors and hosts shall be found in a number of different ways by:

1. Direct search by ESCP-4x and participants in the online catalogue using the following available search criteria: sector, country (of origin and target), languages (mother tongue and other working languages) and duration of exchange;
2. Using the IT Matching Tool to propose matches based on criteria in the application profiles;
3. Pre-existing matches, i.e. participants have already agreed on a match before registering;
4. Specific searches by directly contacting other ESCP-4x in the desired target country;
5. Participants themselves searching the online catalogue for possible partners and proposing matches directly via the online tool;
6. Automatic suggestions sent by the system.

Participants can also be encouraged to look for suitable counterparts outside the online database (e.g. personal contacts, LinkedIn, etc.).

The 'Search/Match' section in the IT Matching Tool will allow ESCP-4x to:

- Review lists and details of accepted participants associated to their own partnership;
- Perform automatic matching in order to instantly find the most suitable partner for a host

²⁵ A reversed mobility is where a visiting organisation becomes a host organisation and vice-versa.

- organisation or a visiting organisation;
- Search participants from other ESCP-4x in the catalogue.

Recommendations

ESCP-4x will play a crucial role in the matching process and will bear equal responsibility for the outcomes. It is therefore crucial that all necessary efforts are made to assess the profiles of potential counterparts as the most pertinent for participants (i.e. check motivations, objectives, eligibility, etc.) and further discuss with participants their expectations about the exchange in order to propose relevant matching based on **mutual interests and benefits**.

The process is about **matching organisations**. ESCP-4x should therefore encourage participants to speak to each other before confirming their exchange. This can be done via emails, by phone (interview) or by any other suitable means.

The entire process of building an exchange can start after a suitable profile has been identified during the search phase. It is comprised of the following 3 important steps:

- **Proposing an exchange,**
- **Drafting the Commitment;**
- **Approving the Commitment.**

2.3 Proposing an exchange

An exchange between two participants wishing to start an exchange can be proposed by the participants themselves. Alternatively, ESCP-4x may take the initiative of proposing exchanges between some of their own members and other counterpart with a matching profile via the IT Matching tool. Newly proposed exchanges should be instantly notified to both partners by email, with direct links to the details of the proposed exchange and options to adopt or discard the proposal.

Direct contact between ClusterXchange partners (on the phone, via Skype or email) is **strongly recommended** before confirming the final match. Experience from the EYE programme has shown that this will decrease the risk of unsuccessful exchanges.

Accepted visitors who have completed an exchange or who are already involved in an exchange will not be available in the online catalogue thereafter. Visiting organisations who would like to become host organisations will however be available in the tool.

2.4 The Commitment to Quality

An exchange that is endorsed by two participants should then lead to a Commitment phase. At this stage, all parties involved shall agree on an official **Commitment to Quality**²⁶ text, and establish the objective(s) of the exchange, the activity plan, the responsibilities, the expected outcomes, the duration of the stay and the planned start and end dates, etc. The text is to be uploaded in the IT Matching Tool²⁷.

It is very important to make sure that all relevant elements are covered in this document, as this will be the basis for the cooperation between the two participants over the stay abroad period. The text must clearly outline the individual objectives of each participant for the specific collaboration, how the collaboration will take place, the activity plan that outlines the tasks and responsibilities of each of the participants and the specific (tangible) expected outcomes for each of the participants. The Commitment to Quality should be specific to the exchange and avoid general statements (such as the objective of 'improving managerial skills' or outcomes such as 'better knowledge of how to run a business').

Please note that the Commitment to Quality will act as the official agreement between the visitor and the

²⁶ A template will be provided by the Support Office.

²⁷ Or digitally signed in the IT Matching Tool when this option will be available.

host, therefore it is in the interest of both participants to ensure that it is as detailed and specific as possible in order to help them fulfil their expectation for the exchange. A thorough commitment will allow to track the progress of the match but also to ensure that the participants each deliver what they have agreed.

Experience from the EYE programme shows that a well prepared Commitment to Quality document gives rise to fewer problems at Commitment execution. Vague and generic commitments, on the other hand, usually lead to unsuccessful exchanges including the termination of the exchange.

The Commitment to Quality shall be the object of a specific approval and follow-up procedure.

The signature of the Commitment to Quality closes the 'building the exchange' phase and is followed by the 'Preparation to the exchange' phase.

Eligibility criteria of an exchange:

1. Participants are accepted only when they comply with the eligibility criteria referred to in heading 1.3.1 Eligibility criteria;
2. Participants must reside in **two different participating countries** (whatever their nationalities/citizenship);
3. The exchange must finish before the project end date of involved ESCP-4x;
4. The exchange is not an internship;
5. The match is not in breach with the points listed in section 1.3.2.5 Exclusion Criteria.

2.5 Random checks by the EC/EASME

After the signature of the Commitment to Quality, the EC/EASME might perform a random check of a proposed exchange. Only after the explicit approval of EASME/EC, the proposed exchange can move to a "Ready to start" status (see section 3.1.2 Ready to start the exchange").

The EC/EASME will monitor the eligibility and quality of the proposed exchange on a sample basis. Based on the available data, ESCP-4x are responsible for ensuring eligibility of each participant and their proposed exchange.

Exchanges which are clearly ineligible, according to the data and already established by the involved ESCP-4x, will not be considered eligible for funding.

IMPORTANT: Visitors should not travel to the hosts' premises before the exchange has reached a "Ready to start" status (see section 3.1.2 Ready to start the exchange"). No costs incurred in the event that the visitor has already travelled abroad will be eligible under the programme until the visitor has signed their financial agreement and official start date has been reached.

Please note that following random checks by the EC/EASME a proposed exchange could be sent back to draft or cancelled by EC/EASME, if deemed ineligible, and the visitor will have to bear any financial costs incurred if they have travelled abroad already.

2.6 Agreement for Financial Support to the visitor

2.6.1 Agreement for Financial Support to the visitor

Grant agreements foresee payment of **lump sums** to the visiting organisations.

A lump sum is defined as a global amount deemed to cover expenses, such as travel, accommodation

and subsistence linked with travel and stay abroad. This amount is paid without any further justification of costs incurred (i.e. visitors do not have to provide proof for their expenses or justify the amount spent).

Lump sums per country are defined in Annex 1 and shall be paid in full for each exchange except in the following non-cumulative cases:

- The duration of the stay is shorter than five working days (excluding travel time);
- The distance between the two involved organisations is shorter than 200 kilometres.

In these cases, the lump sum is reduced by half.

However, ESCP-4x should gather sufficient evidence that the exchange has taken place abroad (**e.g. Hotel invoice, rent contract, boarding passes, letter from the host organisation**).

The financial assistance to the visiting organisation will be initiated in one payment within 10 working days following the reception and validation of relevant closing report, questionnaires and other evidence (if necessary) that the exchange has taken place from the visiting organisation by a relevant ESCP-4x. Submission of these documents by the host should preferably take place at the same time, but cannot delay the payment of the financial assistance if it is not the case.

Visitors with disabilities and visitors coming from or going to outermost regions of the European Union or overseas territories benefit from the maximum monthly allowance to compensate for the extra costs linked to their specific situation.

The maximum financial support is only applicable to visitors with a disability, which requires an additional financial support - for example, a visitor who requires to have a carer with them or a visitor who has an increased cost for the transport as they need to transfer their wheelchair to the host country.

ESCP-4x are thus responsible for assessing visitors with disabilities on a case-by-case basis and an explanation on the decision to grant maximum amount of financial support must be provided in the assessment documents. No supporting documents will be requested by the EC/EASME but ESCP-4x should be able to justify their decision. Note that an official certificate for disability is not required and the submission of such a document does not automatically grant maximum financial support either.

2.6.2 Other agreements

ESCP-4x should ensure that visiting and host organisations are aware that they may need to sign other agreements considered important, such as those related to confidentiality, intellectual property/industrial products, etc. Participants will be free to sign such bilateral arrangements, but they must not contradict the clauses of the Commitment to Quality or of the grant agreement.

ESCP-4x will be responsible for confidential treatment of the action plan and roadmap submitted by participants.

3. Preparation, implementation and follow-up of exchanges

3.1 Preparing the exchange

During the 'preparation to the exchange' phase, participants should receive all relevant information in view of the visiting organisation's stay abroad. They should also be given the opportunity to ask all questions

related to the exchange to the concerned ESCP-4x.

By sending an information kit and guidelines to the visiting organisation, the ESCP-4x closes the 'preparing the exchange' stage and the process moves on to the 'ready-to-start stay' step until the first day of the exchange. During this period, participants may still ask for additional information to ESCP-4x.

3.1.1 Pre-departure information for visiting organisations

Before going abroad, visitors should receive all information about ClusterXchange and important EU related business subjects, such as the internal market, European law issues (particularly regarding business and contract law) and support services, including the European Cluster Collaboration Platform. Each ESCP-4x is responsible for developing its own information kit and guidelines to be provided to visitors (i.e. format and content) once an exchange has been approved by all parties (i.e. the Commitment to Quality has been signed).

Participants need to be informed on how the EU internal market functions, as well as about potential barriers and obstacles to cooperation across borders that they may encounter.

Information kits should contain at least the following topics:

Financial rules

- Visitors should be informed about the financial assistance (lump sums) and the payment procedure.
- The financial agreement between the ESCP-4x and the visiting must be explained and signed.

Programme rules

- Visiting organisations must be informed about the complaint procedure that will be set up and communicated by the Support Office.
- They should be informed about the reporting procedure.
- They should be informed of their responsibilities during the exchange.
- They should be informed about the host's responsibilities during the exchange.
- They should be provided with a welcome pack which will include practical information about the host country, accommodation, contact details of the host, of the Support Office, etc.
- They should be encouraged to send their success story and participate in an Alumni Network.
- **Visiting organisations can only participate once as visiting organisation.**

IMPORTANT: A suitable accident and health insurance (or a comprehensive travel insurance) that will cover visitors during their exchange abroad is indispensable, as the programme cannot provide any assistance in the case of accident or sickness.

3.1.2 Ready-to-start the exchange

During this stage the ESCP-4x should also inform the host of his/her responsibilities in the programme, if not done so already during the outreach phase, as well as the complaint and problem-solving procedures. It should be underlined to the hosts that they will be required at the end of the exchange to fill in an online feedback questionnaire (failing to do so could exclude them from having another exchange, for instance).

Furthermore, participants should be informed that they are required to inform relevant ESCP-4x of any changes in the match, whether about the dates of the exchange or changes to the collaboration/activity plan.

3.2 Stay in host country

3.2.1 Duration of stay abroad

The minimum duration of stay abroad is three working days (excluding travel time) and the maximum duration is one month.

Participants should immediately inform ESCP-4x of any developments that might have an impact on the stay or the exchange between the two participants.

3.2.2. On-site support and monitoring of exchanges

It is expected that Host organisations and possibly host cluster organisations offer local assistance to visitors during their stay with the host organisation. It is also expected that a monitoring on whether the exchange is taking place smoothly is performed, in particular for stays longer than a week.

At the beginning of the stay, the visitor should receive information on support services available to him/her during the stay; before or upon arrival, the visitor should receive a «**Welcome Pack**».

Example of Welcome Pack contents:

- Information about host country, region and city;
- Information about concerned ESCP-4x and available support services;
- Map of city/region;
- Accommodation;
- Administrative steps required before and after leaving country;
- Health insurance;
- Accident insurance;
- Transport;
- Useful telephone numbers;
- Internet access;
- Financial provisions;
- Emergencies (police, hospital(s), card stop, etc.);
- Useful addresses (post offices, tourist information office, doctors, language training centres, etc.);
- Books, booklets, leaflets etc.;
- Useful Web pages.

Suggestion: ESCP-4x might ask participants to complete a brief intermediary activity report, halfway through an exchange that is longer than ten days. Nevertheless, care should be taken not to burden participants too much.

Participants should be contacted regularly during the stay to check progress of the exchange. A regular phone call or email is recommended (in particular for exchanges longer than a week).

Responsibilities of visitors during stay abroad

- Comply with the compulsory rules and regulations the host organisation is subject to;
- Respect the code of conduct and confidentiality rules of the host organisation;
- Tackle any problems/conflicts with the host organisation first, only then contact the ESCP-4x to help solving problem.

- Communicate with ESCP-4x about changes regarding the exchange;
- Comply with all arrangements negotiated for his or her stay in order to achieve the stated objectives. In particular, execute the agreed planned activities and do his or her best to make the stay a success (a certain flexibility and willingness to adapt might be necessary for instance due to cultural differences);
- Submit a report in the specified format at the end of the stay (template available in the IT tool).

Responsibilities of hosts during the exchange

- Comply with all arrangements negotiated for the stay in order to achieve the stated objectives. In particular, execute agreed planned activities and do his or her best to make the stay a success (a certain flexibility and willingness to adapt will be necessary due to cultural differences);
- Agree with the visitor about tasks and responsibilities that match his or her knowledge, skills, competences and objectives and ensure that appropriate equipment and support are available during the stay;
- Provide practical support if required;
- Submit the online feedback questionnaire at the end of stay. host who do not fulfil this requirement cannot be allowed to host again in the ClusterXchange programme.

ESCP-4x are particularly encouraged to stay in touch with the participants after the end of the stay. Ideally, ESCP-4x should keep track of any visible concrete step illustrating the sustainability of the exchange partnership. This would be of great value for subsequent evaluation of the programme.

3.3 Finalising the exchange

3.3.1 Evaluation of exchange by participants

After completion of the period abroad, participants are expected to submit an online final activity report about the exchange (with a by-pass possibility regarding the host's feedback). A successful exchange is an exchange that was implemented in accordance with the related Quality Commitment, regardless of the level of satisfaction linked to the exchange (see section 3.3.2.1). The aim of the questionnaire will be to evaluate the satisfaction level of the exchange and of the programme in general.

3.3.2 Validation of exchange

ESCP-4x responsible for the exchange are supposed to review the answers provided by their participants and confirm whether or not the exchange was successful. This procedure will be carried out via the IT Matching Tool.

Once the evaluation is complete, and validated by relevant ESCP-4x, the exchange dossier is closed.

If some information provided by participants is unclear or not detailed enough, ESCP-4x should have the option to return the survey to them for more details or to clarify some points as necessary.

3.3.2.1 Evaluation criteria

ESCP-4x will have to evaluate whether or not the exchanges are successful.

A **successful exchange** is defined by the EC as an exchange between a visitor and a host that has been established with the help of one or two ESCP-4x provided that such exchange:

- Has been communicated to the EC/EASME in accordance with the rules applicable to the

programme;

- Has been implemented in accordance with the commitments agreed upon in writing in the Quality Commitment by all parties;
- Lasted for the agreed period of time;

It should be noted that declaring an exchange unsuccessful does not necessarily mean that the efforts and costs related to this exchange are ineligible from a programme management point of view.

3.3.2.2 *Early completion of an exchange*

In principle, the visitor should stay for the full term of the exchange, as specified in the agreement for financial support that he/she signed with the ESCP-4x. Leaving the host's city/country will be considered a breach of the rules, unless the visitor has prior agreement from their ESCP-4x.

However, there might be an exception to this rule, namely if the visitor and host mutually agree that the exchange can be shorter than initially agreed. In such a case, justification should be provided that the exchange was nevertheless successful. This means that, in their reports, both parties should explain the reasons for early termination of the exchange and conclude that the stay abroad was nevertheless a success.

The scheme requests a minimum stay of 3 working days (excluding travel time). If a visitor has to return home before the end of this period and if participants' reports are positive, then the exchange can be considered as successful provided that the reduction below the minimum time spent abroad is well justified.

Reimbursement of expenditure

In case of an early completion of an exchange, which is nevertheless successful, the visitor is entitled to receive financial assistance in accordance with section 2.6 Agreement for Financial Support to the visitor.

3.3.2.3 *Dealing with failed exchanges*

A failed exchange is defined as an exchange between a visitor and a host that did not fulfil the commitments agreed to by all parties involved in the scheme Commitment. For instance, objectives were not respected due to a non-respect of the roadmap.

However, an exchange is not considered as failed when:

- Both participants mutually agree that the exchange can be shorter than initially agreed and are both satisfied with the exchange;
- The exchange breaks due to force majeure.

Note that the **visiting organisation can only participate once in the programme** but if a match has failed due to the host breaking the rules of the programme or the terms of the agreed commitment, the EC and EASME may consider granting a second exchange for the visitor (case by case decision).

If this is the case, the total length of the two exchanges must not exceed one month. Yet, such cases should be considered an exception.

Furthermore, if the visitor has remained with the host for the full duration of the exchange or has only voiced issues with the match after some time of the exchange, and not immediately when they occurred, the exchange will not be considered failed.

Reimbursement of expenditure

The involved ESCP-4x should assess the validity of the reasons given by the participants for early termination of an exchange because of the exchange **failure**.

The visiting organisation will have to reimburse any amounts received if the exchange failed because the visitor did not respect his/her obligations under the scheme.

If the exchange failed because the host organisation did not respect his/her obligations under scheme's Commitment to Quality, no reimbursement will be claimed from the visitor and the amount corresponding to the length of the actual stay will be paid.

When responsibility for the unsuccessful exchange cannot be attributed to either the visitor or the host the decision to reimburse the visitor should be taken by the EC/EASME.

If the exchange has to be cancelled within the week of stay, **for reasons of force majeure or reasons outside the control of the visitor**²⁸, the actual expenses incurred by the visitor and supported by the corresponding invoices will be reimbursed up to the limit of the monthly allowance. In these cases, the visitor might, upon approval by EC/EASME, be included again in the database for a future matching. If this is the case, the total length of the two exchanges must not exceed 1 month. Yet, such cases should be considered as exceptions and only upon approval by EC/EASME.

3.3.3 Exchange completed

The exchange is considered completed (and will be reflected as such in the IT Matching Tool) after the final activity reports of the two participants have been validated by relevant ESCP-4x and the exchange dossier is closed.

3.4 Maximising long-term benefits of the exchange

3.4.1 Making the most of your success stories

Successful exchanges should be promoted to give visibility to the participants, involved ESCP-4x and encourage others to join the programme.

The Support Office will develop a **Success Story Kit** in order to help ESCP-4x write about their successful exchanges. The kit could contain the following documents:

- Guidelines on how to write an appealing success story;
- A press release template to outline the success story;
- Tips and tricks on how to maximise the promotional value of the successful exchange (e.g. advertising a story to journalists, using 'ambassadors' at events, etc.).

Since the Success Story Kit will be made available after the ESCP-4x start of activities, the EC strongly encourages that ESCP-4x express needs and provide feedback on the Success Story Kit to the Support Office. The consultation process will be launched by the Support Office.

The more stories you have as a successful ESCP-4x, the more participants will want to join you.

3.4.2 Establishing an Alumni Network

Building awareness, communicating the benefits of the programme and creating customer loyalty takes time. Establishing an Alumni Network for the ClusterXchange will considerably increase the visibility of this new exchange scheme and position it as a high quality professional European exchange programme, as well as provide ongoing value to the participants. The form of the Alumni Network will be analysed but ESCP-4x are encouraged to form informal Alumni Networks between their past participants.

²⁸ i.e. non availability of the host after the visitor's arrival, serious illness or death of a relative of any of the participants,...

Annex 1 - Applicable to COSME grant agreements

This list is fixed during the implementation of the projects selected under European Cluster Excellence programme call for proposals (COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02).

Monthly financial assistance paid by ESCP-4x to third parties (visiting organisations)	
Country of stay/Host country	Amount per month / €
Albania	530
Armenia	610
Austria	900
Belgium	830
Bosnia-Herzegovina	560
Bulgaria	560
Croatia	720
Cyprus	780
Czech Republic	610
Denmark	1100
Germany	830
Estonia	670
Finland	950
Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	560
France	900
Greece	780
Hungary	670
Iceland	900
Ireland	1000
Italy	900
Kosovo ²⁹	560
Latvia	610
Lithuania	560
Luxembourg	830
Malta	720
Moldova	530
Montenegro	560
Netherlands	830
Poland	610
Portugal	780
Romania	560
Serbia	560
Slovakia	610
Slovenia	720
Spain	830
Sweden	950
Turkey	750
Ukraine	530
United Kingdom	1000

²⁹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Entrepreneurs from/to: Outermost Regions of the EU (referred to in Article 349 TFEU) ³⁰ and Overseas Countries and Territories (referred to in Article 198 TFEU) ³¹	1100
Visitors with disabilities (regardless of the country of stay)	1100

³⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/themes/outermost-regions/

³¹ http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/octs_en

Annex 2 - Table of entities eligible for the ClusterXchange pilot scheme

Cluster organisation and business network organisations:

Eligible applicants are **cluster organisations and business network organisations** that are involved in supporting the enhancement of collaboration, networking and learning in innovation clusters to **stimulate innovative activity** by promoting or channelling specialised and customised business support services especially to SMEs and/or promoting the sharing of facilities and exchange of knowledge and expertise, in compliance with the coverage of 'innovation clusters' as described in the sections 1.2 and 1.3 and Annex I of the "EU Framework for State Aid for Research and Development and Innovation"³².

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises:

The European Union defines SME³³s as enterprises which: 'fulfil the criteria laid down in the Recommendation as summarised in the table below. Besides the staff headcount ceiling, an enterprise will also qualify as an SME if it meets either the turnover ceiling or the balance sheet ceiling, but not necessarily both'.

Specific rules are applicable when calculating ceilings for enterprises which are not autonomous (partner or linked enterprises) and for publicly owned enterprises, which do not qualify as SMEs.

The SME definition document includes a model declaration that can be requested for enterprises whose qualification as SME is not clear.

Enterprise category	Head count	Turnover	Or Balance sheet total
Small and medium-sized	< 250	< € 50 million	< € 43 million

Scaling-up support organisations include technology centres³⁴, research institutes, fab labs, (digital)

³² According to point 15(s) of this Commission Communication (2014/C 198/01), an “*innovation clusters*’ means structures or organised groups of independent parties (such as innovative start-ups, small, medium and large enterprises, as well as research and knowledge dissemination organisations, non-for-profit organisations and other related economic actors) designed to stimulate innovative activity by promoting sharing of facilities and exchange of knowledge and expertise and by contributing effectively to knowledge transfer, networking, information dissemination and collaboration among the undertakings and other organisations in the cluster”. Point 12(e) Point 12(e) also identified aid for innovation clusters as a State aid measure that may, under specific conditions, be compatible with the internal market. This includes supporting the investment in open and shared infrastructures for innovation clusters, and supporting, for no longer than 10 years, the operation of clusters for the enhancement of collaboration, networking and learning. Its annex I on eligible costs further clarifies that operating aid to this effect covers personnel and administrative costs relating to the (a) animation of the cluster to facilitate collaboration, information sharing and the provision or channelling of specialised and customised business support services; (b) marketing of the cluster; (c) management of the cluster’s facilities; and (d) knowledge sharing and networking and transnational cooperation. See: [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52014XC0627\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52014XC0627(01)&from=EN)

³³ You will find further information about the EU’s SME definition at: http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition_en

³⁴ Numerous terms are used for “technology centres”, such as innovation centres, science parks, technology parks, fab labs, co-working centres and so on. See also European Commission (2014) Setting up, managing and evaluation EU Science and Technology Parks: An advice and guidance report on good practice, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/studies/pdf/stp_report_en.pdf. The European Commission has defined and mapped *technology centres* that provide services to SMEs to innovate with Key Enabling Technologies (KETs) as any public or private organisation capable of delivering research and innovation close-to-market services to SMEs from Technological Readiness Level (TRL) 3 to 8, but with at least one TRL >5. See <https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/kets-tools/kets-tc/map>. For an explanation of TRL, see https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2014_2015/annexes/h2020-wp1415-annex-g-trl_en.pdf

innovation hubs³⁵, creative hubs, resource-efficiency service providers³⁶, incubators and accelerators. They comprise any public or private organisations that is providing access to the testing and validation of technologies and concepts, market intelligence as well as business incubation and acceleration support services in relation to the uptake of advanced technology, digitalisation, new business models, low-carbon and resource-efficient solutions, creativity and design and skills upgrading.

³⁵ Digital Innovation Hubs act as one-stop-shops where companies –especially SMEs, startups and mid-caps– can get access to technology-testing, financing advice, market intelligence and networking opportunities in relation to digital transformation and uptake of digital technologies. See also <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/digital-innovation-hubs> and <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/digital-innovation-hubs-tool>

³⁶ <https://www.resourceefficient.eu/en/support-organisations>

Annex 3 - List of promotional material and recommended communication methods

Intranet (Members only section of the public website)	Press/Radio/TV interview
Press breakfasts/conferences	Award ceremonies
Leaflet/ User Guide	Programme website
Letters/mailing/phone calls/visits	Programme presentations/info days
Media kit containing the following documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Press release template; - Fact sheet; - Tips & tricks on how to deal with the press; - Press dossier EN; - Press dossier FR; - Latest statistics. 	Promotional videos of the programme
Newsletters	Progress reports
Press articles	Success stories
Promotional pack (posters/ stickers/pens/folders/note pads)	Web based campaign
Roll-up stand ("Banner")	Workshops

Annex 4 – List of useful websites, links and documents

Websites

European Cluster Collaboration Platform website: www.clustercollaboration.eu

DG GROW: <http://ec.europa.eu/growth/>

EASME: <http://ec.europa.eu/easme>

Funding and Tender portal Guidance and Manuals: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/support/manuals>

From the EYE programme:

EYE Programme website: www.erasmus-entrepreneurs.eu

EYE Programme guide: <https://www.erasmus-entrepreneurs.eu/upload/Programme%20Guide%20EN%20May%202015.pdf>