

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

**Call ID:
H2020-JTI-IMI2-2020-20
IMI 2 20th Call for Proposals
Stage 1 Evaluation**

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1. Introduction and approach taken by the observers

The independent observation was undertaken to witness and report on the practical workings of the evaluation process, on the conduct and fairness of the evaluation sessions, on the application of the award criteria and on the procedures and their implementation, including IT tools. Based on their observations and feedback from the experts, the observers give independent judgement on the conduct and quality of the evaluation and advice for improvement of the evaluation process.

In execution of their task the observers took the following approach:

The observers received information ahead of the central meeting, had pre-meeting conference calls with the Call Coordinator and Head of Scientific Operations, access to the webinars for experts and applicants, as well as all the documentation related to the call and access to the proposal submission and evaluation on-line system SEP.

During the central meeting, the observers attended the full four days of the evaluations. They split their time between the parallel topics. In the first and second day topics 1, 2 and 4 ran in parallel. Topics 2, 3, 5 and 6 ran in parallel in the third day, and topic 6 on the last day. The observers also interacted with the IMI scientific officers and received individual experts' comments and feedback by email after the meetings.

2. Overall impression

a. *Scale of complexity of the evaluation task:*

During the 4 days of central meetings the proposals submitted to 6 topics were discussed. Topic 2 covered 4 subtopics. One proposal of topic 2 was declared ineligible. Therefore, 26 proposals were evaluated and discussed. The number of proposals per topic is listed below.

Topic number	Topic title	Discussed proposals
1	Early diagnosis, prediction of radiographic outcomes and developmental of rational, personalised treatment strategies to improve long-term outcomes in psoriatic arthritis	4
2	Innovations to accelerate vaccine development and manufacture 2.1. Systems-immunology platform for model development 2.2. CHIMs 2.3. State-of-art innovations in human in vitro mucosa models and assays 2.4. Biomanufacturing platforms using mathematical modeling	8 (2 in each subtopic)
3	Academia and industry united innovation and treatment for tuberculosis	1
4	Tumor plasticity	9
5	Proton versus photon therapy for oesophageal cancer - a trimodality strategy	1
6	Handling of protein drug products and stability concerns	3
Total submitted proposals		26

Proposals were scored using the evaluation criteria (excellence, impact, quality and efficiency of the implementation) as specified within the call text.

b. ***Transparency of the procedures:***

The procedures were clearly stated in the documentation, reiterated during the briefing sessions and when needed, moderators clarified the scoring system to the experts. The difference between a weakness and shortcoming was clarified at the beginning of topics sessions. In all panels the moderators paid particular attention to aligning the scores on the criteria with the comments of the experts.

c. ***Throughput time of the process and the efficiency of the procedures***

The throughput time varied between the topics but all evaluations were completed on time. One topic finished in one day instead of the planned two-day work. There was only 1 submitted proposal in this topic and the experts easily reached agreement on the comments and scoring. Discussions in another topic took longer per proposal than other topics and this group overran on the first day. It took a long time to reach consensus. Consensus was achieved through careful consideration of the text by the experts and the assistance of the panel moderators.

d. ***Efficiency, reliability and usability of the implementation of the procedures, including the IT-tools:***

All experts received WebEx guidelines to facilitate the videoconferences in advance. The moderators received in advance clear technical instructions on how to organize and manage the WebEx meetings. Generally, the technical provision was of good quality although in topic 6 experts had difficulties viewing the projected text. It was fixed several times to continue the discussions. The chat function was used effectively both for editing of the text and reaching consensus on the scores. Most of experts were positive about WebEx as a web conference tool while some experts expressed preference for Zoom as a tool. Two experts experienced connection problems. An expert with hearing health issues found it difficult to follow the on-line discussions but the use of chat and the moderator's skills compensated for this. Generally, the technology allowed extended discussion although due to the online format sometimes it was hard for experts to contribute to the general discussion and to express viewpoints without interrupting other participants' turns. A suggestion was made to use the "raise hand" option of the videoconferencing tool more often. The experts overall were satisfied with the SEP evaluation tool.

e. ***Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality:***

Each group of experts was briefed by the responsible IMI scientific officer on the first morning of their evaluation. The introductory video address by the IMI Executive Director Dr Pierre Meulien and the Powerpoint presentation were played. The procedures were highlighted including confidentiality and conflicts of interest. Proper measures had been arranged to allow experts with a potential conflict of interest to leave the room for the specific discussion and wait in the virtual waiting room. This was applied several times in different topics sessions. During the discussions the experts, with the moderators' guidance, paid particular attention to point not only to the weaknesses and shortcomings but also to the strengths of the proposals. The experts spent time ensuring that they had evaluated fairly and consistently the proposals in that topic by revisiting and comparing the text and scores until they felt this was done correctly.

f. ***Conformity of the evaluation process*** witnessed with the evaluation procedures published in the H2020 Grants Manual:

The evaluation process followed the procedures published in the H2020 Grants Manual as they are reproduced for the procedures for experts for IMI2 calls.

g. ***Quality of the EU evaluation process*** in comparison with the evaluation procedures of national and/or other international research funding schemes:

Some of the experts were new to evaluating IMI proposals and they felt that the follow-up for the report writing and evaluations were very streamlined and comprehensive. Experts paid particular attention to not giving recommendations and to evaluating the proposals as they were submitted, keeping in mind the scoring criteria.

h. Quality of the evaluation process overall:

The overall quality of the evaluation was high. The experts felt that the proposals were thoroughly discussed, fairly and transparently with careful attention to feedback and scoring.

3. Any other remarks

- The experts commented that the **evaluation process** was rigorous and fair.
- Even though there was clarification of the **scoring system** both in the preliminary distributed materials and the briefing sessions, still an expert was unclear if all three categories are given equal weight towards the final ranking. There was another expert's opinion that the three evaluation criteria should not be equated but that "excellence" should have more weight than the other two.
- The experts considered that they had received appropriate **documentation beforehand**; the process itself had been well explained to them via email and via a dedicated webinar before the evaluation as well as on the first day of the consensus meeting. A suggestion was made to keep in the draft of the consensus report the names of experts who wrote certain parts of it. This would facilitate the discussion. The suggestion referred to instances when the author of a particular comment or view was not immediately evident.
- **Quality of the briefing sessions** was high based both on our observer opinion and the experts' feedback.
- **The understanding by experts of the call** (context, topics), of the evaluation process and their role and of the award criteria and scoring scheme was good. One expert expressed concern that despite IMI stating that it promotes innovation in medicine, in the current format innovation does not seem to be the most important parameter in the evaluation. A suggestion for improvement of the process was made towards allowing multiple proposals to the second stage and the first stage to be focused more on the innovation potential. If multiple consortia are allowed to talk with the same industry partners this, in the view of the expert, might increase the chances to identify the best fit for the partnership. This was the opinion of one expert.
- **The allocation of experts to proposals:** balance (gender, geographic, sector), relevance and balance of expertise was good. Generally, for the call as a whole gender balance of experts was achieved, i.e. 17 female experts and 24 male experts were engaged. However, in some topics there was a higher gender ratio in favour of men, e.g. in one topic there were 4 men and only 1 woman and in another there were 5 men and only 1 woman. Out of 41 experts, only 3 experts were from EU-13 countries. In one of the topics, there were 2 experts from the same institution but the independent observers were satisfied that these experts had different areas of expertise and that they felt completely free to express their own views. Members of the IMI pool of patient experts were included in the evaluation of proposals in some topics. As a whole, the evaluators' expertise was sufficiently diverse to ensure the proper evaluation of proposals.
- **The occurrence and handling of specific issues.** Two specific issues appeared in the sessions – proposals asking higher budget than the call allows and proposals beyond page limit. For the two projects with a higher budget preliminary contact with the applicants was arranged. One proposal fixed the budget and the new budget was presented and discussed by the experts while the other excess budget proposal justified it by the many in-vitro models in the proposal that at stage 2 might be reduced. As for the excess pages proposal, the experts flagged that in the report. A general issue is that the moderators needed to remind some experts that their judgement is to be based on the proposal text and evidence from that, which they did conscientiously.
- **Overall conduct of staff.** The moderators were mindful of involving all the experts in the discussions. The moderators were very skillful considering the new distant means of handling the evaluations. They followed the same standards in the different topics. The experts expressed satisfaction with the responsiveness and professionalism of the IMI Scientific Officers.
- **Workload and time given to evaluators for their work.** Generally, the experts were satisfied with the workload and the time given for the remote phase and consensus meetings. They had freedom and time to speak and discuss the weaknesses and strengths of proposals. However, due to the different number of proposals submitted in the topics, some groups experienced higher workload and one expert concluded

that they spent 2 days longer than the time suggested to review the proposals, submit the Individual Evaluation Reports and prepare the draft Consensus Report as a rapporteur.

- **The conduct of the consensus meeting** was very good and enjoyable. It allowed for an honest debate and gave some clear insights that did not emerge during the individual assessment.

4. Summary of Recommendations

The observed evaluation process was robust and mature. It ran in accordance with the standards published. The experts were satisfied with the workload, timeframe, the IT tools, and skills of moderators.

There are a few minor recommendations:

- 1) Agreeing in advance conventions for using Cisco Webex such as the hand raise signal to allow expression of experts' opinion and using the chat as a standard for voting.
- 2) Trying to achieve better gender balance of experts per topic.
- 3) Involving more experts from EU-13 countries.
- 4) To speed up the process of writing consensus report, it would be helpful to keep in the draft version citation of authorship of the expressed opinion.
- 5) It is worthwhile for the scientific officers to reiterate the equal weight of the three evaluation criteria towards the final ranking as explained in the materials distributed before the remote evaluation and during the briefing session at the beginning of the consensus meeting.