

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2016-10-two-stage

IMI-2 10th Call for Proposals

Stage 1 Evaluation

Date of evaluation: 24 – 28 April 2017

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Present at the evaluation: Monday 24 to Friday 28 April 2017

1. Introduction and approach taken by the observer

1.1. Introduction

The present document is the report of the independent Observers on the assessment of Stage 1 of the 10th Call for proposals by the Innovative Medicines Initiative 2 Joint Undertaking (IMI2 JU) in Horizon 2020:

Call for Proposals: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2016-10-two-stage

Published: 21 December 2016

Deadline: 28 March 2017 – 17:00:00 Brussels time

Budget: from EFPIA companies and IMI2 Associated Partners: EUR 174 140 000
from IMI2 JU: EUR 173 890 000

This report contains the main findings of the independent Observers assessing the efficiency of the conduct of the procedures, usability of the SEP (System for the Evaluation of Proposals) instrument (new IT tool in IMI2 JU), the conduct and fairness of the evaluation sessions, and the compliance with the applicable rules in particular application of the evaluation criteria by the evaluators.

The objective is to give an independent view of the evaluation process to the IMI Programme Office. Accordingly, observations and remarks are made in the relevant sections and overall conclusions are summarized at the end of the report.

In brief, the IMI2 JU evaluation procedure is organised in two-stages; following their submission by the applicants, the Short Proposals (30 pages) are evaluated remotely by independent experts, those meet in Brussels to jointly discuss their opinion and prepare the Consensus reports. Only one proposal is selected and invited to submit a full proposal to the second Stage, where the merge with the industrial consortium is requested.

The number of proposals received was 36 all of which were eligible in this call.

1.2. Methodology

The Observers were invited to a 30 minutes briefing by the Head of Scientific Operations the week before the Stage 1 meetings, on 20 April 2017.

In addition, all relevant information was made available to the Observers in different forms: email with relevant links, a set of key documents linked together in a paper document was provided, a set of documents including CVs of experts on a USB key handed out at the beginning of the meetings. This was timely and useful information to the Observers.

The Observers attended also twice the general presentation delivered by the IMI2 JU Executive Director to the Panel members on the morning of each of the Panel group meetings on 24 and 27 April 2017. This was very useful for all experts and Observers as they got a brief, comprehensive overview of the IMI2 JU context, content and evaluation sequence. The Observers were also provided with a detailed planning of each Stage 1 Panel meeting taking place in the week of the 24 to 28 April 2017.

The Observers monitored the evaluation process at the same time as the experts and had the chance to see the SEP system working.

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

- Reading all specific IMI2 JU documents, especially the Annual Work Plan 2016 including the 8 Topics of the 10th Call (H2020-JTI-IMI2-2016-10-two-stage) and relevant rules and guidelines.
- Updating in relevant Horizon 2020 documentation in particular the rules for participation and summary of the most relevant provisions for IMI2 JU.
- Studying information on changes implemented for the first time in the evaluation of the 10th Call for proposals compared to the evaluation of earlier calls, involving two significant changes introduced, the exclusion of EFPIA experts during the meetings and the use of the new SEP tool from the Commission.
- Examining aggregated comments of the remote individual evaluation reports of the experts, Consensus reports and Panel reports.
- Watching Webinar and slides.

- Being present during the Panel meetings, alternatively in different meetings to cover all Call Topics, follow the progress of the evaluation, observe the attitude of experts and IMI2 JU staff and see the functioning of the SEP tool.
- Having informal discussions throughout the evaluation process, with various IMI2 JU staff members, Head of Scientific Operations and Executive Director, experts and rapporteurs.
- Debriefing each other and exchanging impressions and observations in between meetings and global debriefing each end of day.
- Making a brief comparison with similar procedures among the European programmes.
- Preparing the present report.

The Observers took particular care to establish a methodology in line with the requirements of IMI2 JU.

In addition, in order to obtain as much information as possible from the experts, a short (anonymous) Questionnaire for input from Panel experts was drawn up by the Observers (with the agreement of the representatives of IMI2 JU).

2. Overall impression

In the following the independent Observers have summarized their general observations and detailed specific aspects of the evaluation process assessed.

2.1. Observers general observations

- The overall quality of the evaluation process was satisfying given the scale of complexity of the process.
- The evaluation was done in conformity with the applicable rules and procedures published; the procedures are explained with clarity guaranteeing transparency of the process; no violations against the rules of the published evaluation guidelines were observed.
- The implementation of the procedures, including the new IT-tool SEP, was efficient, reliable and user-friendly. This process tailored to IMI mission and objectives explains that the throughput time of the process was somehow long.
- Nevertheless, the well-defined evaluation procedure, the commitment of experts, the professionalism of the scientific officers and the support by the other competent staff, allowed the proposals of the eight Topics to benefit of an outstanding quality evaluation.
- Particular care was taken by both experts and IMI2 JU moderators to impartiality, fairness and confidentiality of the evaluation.
- Experts were of a high quality and all the relevant expertise for the evaluation of each Topic was covered through the composition of the Panels.
- The absence of the EFPIA representatives was not considered an issue by the experts.
- Evaluation of the proposals, Panel discussions and hearings of the applicants, were rigorous and fair; hearings were organized in a very effective manner and appeared welcomed by all experts.
- Consensus was reached by the experts on the scoring, ranking and comments of all proposals, no major difficulties were observed.
- The final Consensus Evaluation Reports faithfully represent the consensus opinion of the Panels.

2.2. Assessment

The independent Observers have observed the evaluation of the 10th Call and are pleased to note that overall the evaluation sequence went smoothly. The quality of the Panel members and the work delivered by the IMI2 JU staff was of high level. Different aspects merit further attention as described in the following.

Proposals:

At Stage 1 the 30 pages Short Proposals were evaluated against three criteria: excellence, impact and implementation, following Horizon 2020 rules. Each proposal was evaluated by all experts of a same Topic, the proposal/expert ratio is therefore different depending on the number of Short Proposals received for each Topic, which in some of the Topics was rather low.

A total of 36 Short Proposals was received, all of them were eligible.

Experts:

The Observers wish to underline that in general the experts have shown motivation and interest, honesty and fairness in their evaluation work, dedication and integrity.

IMI2 JU has ensured the turnover of experts. There was a substantial number of new experts, defined as not having participated previously in IMI calls

The diversity and the proportion of experts with industrial, regulatory, academic etc. expertise were also very good, leading to fruitful discussions.

The gender balance varied from one Panel to the other, however females represented 41% of the experts.

There was full agreement among the experts on given marks for each criterion. The experts felt that the right decisions were made. The Consensus Evaluation Reports were drafted with active participation of all Panel members, reviewed and agreed collectively, under the guidance of the IMI2 JU scientific and legal officers, ensuring the comments and recommendations were aligned with the scores.

The role of the moderators (IMI2 JU Scientific Officers) was important in guiding the discussion and providing clarifications, while not affecting the outcome. Following the Questionnaire's answers, one hundred percent (100%) of the experts found their work essential and excellent.

The prevention and management of conflicts of interest were the most important ingredients for ensuring equity and integrity in peer review and to preserve the credibility of the process. In this 10th Call, IMI scientific and legal officers well managed this matter and no case of conflict of interest was observed.

Procedure and process, including the IT-tool:

None of the independent Observers observed any apparent violations of the published rules, procedures and guidelines, which were timely published and transparent.

The procedure was considered understandable in the context of IMI2 JU with strong industrial governance and future involvement of industrial consortia in the projects.

The evaluation process first Stage divided into two parts – first an individual evaluation carried out remotely involving the completion of an individual evaluation report, secondly consensus meetings in Brussels where the proposals were discussed, agreement on comments and scores reached, consensus reports written for each proposal and final selection of one proposal to go for the second stage plus ranking lists were produced - was considered clear.

One of the experts evaluating a proposal was appointed as rapporteur and was responsible for the consensus report; to help the rapporteurs, the moderators typed the reports on their behalf in the evaluation tool – SEP.

Before starting remote evaluation, experts received a written briefing with detailed slides and links to relevant background documents and other useful material; they also followed a webinar moderated by the Scientific Officer responsible for the topic, explaining the evaluation process. Most of the experts reported to be satisfied with the level of preparation.

Each proposal was evaluated remotely by at least 5 experts, in all eight topics each expert received all submitted Short Proposals. Depending on the number of proposals submitted per topic, Experts received a number of proposals varying between 2 and 10.

Experts then joined their Topic Panels. Moderators for most Topic Panels gave a further topic-specific short briefing before consensus discussions started. Experts whom the independent Observers talked to were positive to those briefings as they ensured that all experts had the same basic knowledge and industry need understanding of the Call and Topics in question.

Globally, IMI2 JU moderators did an excellent job as attested by the experts' comments on the questionnaire (excellent, essential, very appreciated, impressive, very helpful, fantastic...).

Marks between 0 and 5 including half-marks were used for proposal scoring. Three standard criteria (excellence, impact and implementation) were scored at Stage 1. Each expert completed an individual evaluation report in SEP for each proposal evaluated.

The new IT tool for Horizon 2020 SEP has replaced the former IMI2 JU tailored one (Sofia) and was used for the first time at IMI2 JU evaluations for the 10th Call. The new IT tool was considered easy to learn, user-friendly and reliable. 85% of the experts who responded to the questionnaire considered that the tool worked effectively.

3. Any other remarks

The Observers have the following other remarks:

- The quality of the documentation provided to experts beforehand was satisfying.
- The understanding by experts of the 10th Call (context, topics), of the evaluation process and their role and of the evaluation criteria and scoring scheme was globally very good.
- The allocation of experts to proposals was diverse; geographic balance very different from one panel to the other, the gender unevenly respected, the sector distribution, relevance and balance of expertise however quite well covered.
- The process of the individual evaluations and the actors involved was excellent; the process of the consensus meetings and the actors involved rigorous and responsible.
- Workload and time given to experts for their work, remotely and/or on-site, was sufficient (41% of those who answered the Questionnaire marked that more time would be needed for remote evaluation).
- The quality of evaluation summary reports was overall very good.
- Overall conduct of staff, responsiveness, hospitality, competence, was good.
- The infrastructure and working conditions for evaluators were excellent.
- The evaluation was conducted by the IMI2 JU staff in a very professional way.
- The evaluation involved important logistics preparation of the meetings (travels, hotel booking, printing evaluation reports, call documents, applicant proposals, IT system etc.). No complaint of any expert was expressed.

4. Overall Conclusions

- There were no apparent violations of the published Guidelines and the evaluations, and discussions were fair and transparent.
- All evaluation IMI2 JU procedures have been fully respected.
- The well-defined evaluation procedures, the high scientific level of Independent Experts and the skilled Scientific Officers supported by a very competent staff allowed the proposals to benefit of an outstanding quality assessment.
- All participants approached their tasks with commitment and professionalism.
- The Consensus Evaluation Reports were drafted with active participation of all Panel members and reviewed collectively, under the guidance of the IMI2 JU Scientific Officers. They faithfully represent the consensus opinion of the Panels.
- It should be emphasized that the IMI2 JU assessment procedures have reached a very high level of quality directly connected to the expertise, professionalism and competence of its employees.

5. Acknowledgements

We were helped in our task by all participants in the Stage 1 consensus meetings.

Our thanks to the experts for being open to being “observed” and for the formal and informal conversations that helped formulate this report.

We particularly thank the IMI staff for their help, competence and hospitality before, during and after our stay in Brussels in scientific, organisational, procedural and logistic matters.