

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2019-18-two-stage

**IMI2 JU 18th Call for Proposals
Stage 1 Evaluation**

15-18 October 2019

Number of pages in this report (title page included): 6

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Present at the evaluation: 15-18 October 2019



Signature and date

November 12th 2019

1. Introduction

This report compiles my observations and recommendations as independent observer of the evaluation of proposals for stage 1 of IMI2 Call 18.

According to contract, the observer "must examine the way in which the evaluators apply the evaluation criteria, verify if the procedures set out in the Horizon 2020 (H2020) Rules for Participation Regulation No 1290/20131 are followed and give advice on how the evaluation procedures could be improved".

The Call was opened on 26 June 2019 with a submission deadline of 26 September 2019 with an indicative call budget of EUR 85 871 760 from EFPIA and IMI2 Associated Partners and EUR 74 866 000 from IMI2 JU. In total 26 proposals were submitted, all of them eligible.

Topic number	Topic title	Submitted proposals
1	Central repository of digital pathology slides to support the development of artificial intelligence tools	4
2	Health Outcomes Observatories – empower patients with tools to measure their outcomes in a standardised manner creating transparency of health outcomes	4
3	Improving patient access, understanding and adherence to healthcare information: an integrated digital health information project	9
4	Establishing international standards in the analysis of patient reported outcomes and health-related quality of life data in cancer clinical trials	2
5	Accelerating research & innovation for advanced therapy medicinal products	4
6	Supporting the development of engineered T cells	3
Total number of submitted proposals		26

The remote evaluation took place from 27 September to 9 October 2019. The individual evaluation reports (IERs) were completed and submitted until 9 October 2019. Access was then given to the aggregated version of the individual reports to all evaluators via the Submission and Evaluation of Proposals support system (SEP). In addition, one rapporteur for each proposal received instructions on how to compile these IERs on the basis of which he/she produced a draft consensus report, which was discussed and finalized during onsite evaluation, which took place in Brussels from 15 October to 18 October 2019.

2. Approach taken by the observer

I was present at the onsite evaluation from 15 October 2019 to 18 October 2019.

Prior to that I received documents and additionally, links to supporting call documents, got access to the proposals and IERs via SEP as well as documents relevant to the evaluation

process. In addition, there was an upfront conference call with the Head of Scientific Operations and the Call Coordinator. This was very helpful, since it made the access to and the understanding of the documents easier in particular by summarizing the latest updates of the evaluation procedure (in particular since IMI2 Call 9).

The onsite observations started with attendance at the general briefing meeting in the morning of 15 October 2019. I was given an opportunity to address the experts in order to present a short outline of my task and to encourage them to provide feedback and suggestions on the process at any time.

In addition to joining the evaluation discussions the observation was supplemented during my stay in Brussels through conversations with independent experts and IMI staff members including the legal team and again with the Head of Scientific Operations and the Call Coordinator.

3. Overall impression

The evaluation procedure I observed was very well structured and managed by the IMI secretariat. The relevant expertise, diversity and the quality of the work produced by evaluators appointed by the IMI2 JU were found to be very good. The moderators did an excellent job.

The high standard of expertise of the evaluators and the professionalism and dedication of IMI staff ensured an **impartial and fair review process**.

My conclusion is, that the scientific evaluations have been carried out in a just, transparent and unbiased manner. The ranked lists of proposals **have been produced according to the Regulation (EU) No 1290/2013**.

The IMI evaluation procedure definitely is one of highest quality compared with other international evaluation procedures, I had the opportunity to follow (FP7, H2020).

Scale of complexity of the evaluation

IMI2 research projects, funded by the EU under Horizon 2020 (H2020) and with contributions of EFPIA members and IMI2 JU Associated Partners are quite different as compared to other H2020 research projects.

The call topic texts are very detailed and each one originally started as an initiative of few EFPIA members, in some cases of IMI2 JU Associated Partner or even external organizations¹. In the final topic text, the "industrial consortium" is listed.

The independent experts now have to evaluate applications, which are presented by "applicant consortia", who are willing to collaborate with the industrial consortia as listed in the respective topics.

¹ An excellent introduction is to be found here: <https://www.imi.europa.eu/apply-funding/imi-call-process>, see "Before the Call launch - Topic development".

This is complex, in particular since the proposals not only have to be evaluated against two evaluation criteria ("excellence", "impact"), which is standard for stage 1 proposals in two-stage Calls, but in addition against "implementation" - the latter is the case since IMI2 call 9. Further on, since IMI2 call 10 there are no more industry representatives present at the onset of the consensus meetings. Before this change in IMI2 call 10 these representatives could be asked for clarifications, regarding the role of the industry consortium.

Having noted this complexity I want to underline, that all evaluators I spoke with were well aware of the characteristics of the Call.

Support by the IMI secretariat, implementation of the procedures

The independent experts obviously were well prepared by the material they got beforehand: The webinar prior to their remote work; the software tool SEP and the onsite briefings in Brussels. The experts then were well guided by the moderators during the meetings.

The execution of the consensus meetings is a well-established procedure. I was impressed by the skills of the moderators and most of all, that all of them followed a common strategy **in a very stringent way**, of course with individual variations, as a result of the personalities of the moderators and the experts.

It became clear that great care was taken in provision of support for the moderators. This was done for example by a moderator briefing prior to the onsite evaluations and so called "Notes for the moderator ..." which summarized the crucial points and stages of the evaluation and which could be consulted when necessary at any time.

There is one issue I found exceptionally impressive: In the last version of the IMI2 evaluation form (V 1.5) with the title "First-stage evaluation criteria in the two-stage procedure", the sub criteria had been updated. This document contains the central template supporting the evaluators in the scoring and the justification of the scores. The sub criteria now have a form, which makes them easier to read and to understand, thus, the job of the evaluators can be done in a much more straightforward manner. The improvements in relation to version 1.4 - which already was a good document - are remarkable.

Workload and time given to evaluators for their work

As stated in the introduction, this report applies to the stage 1 evaluation of a two stage IMI2 Call. It was already mentioned before, that there are specifics to IMI2 research projects.

A standard first stage short proposal in H2020 has a page limit of 10 pages. Until 2017 a short proposal in the case of IMI2 had a limit of 15 pages and this limit then has been increased to 30 pages, which I fully endorse in the light of the complexity mentioned.

It is clear, that this increases the workload for the evaluator. The consideration of three instead of two evaluation criteria has a similar effect. There are further points, related to the very nature of IMI2 projects, but I don't need to point out these in detail. The message is unambiguous: The workload is definitely above standard as compared to other stage 1

evaluations and this is considered in the case of IMI, where the time allocated for the evaluation of stage 1 proposals is higher as compared to other research programs.

The independent experts were dedicated, they considered peer reviews as part of their duties as active scientists, they had accepted the contractual conditions and in general they didn't complain about the time allocated for the evaluation, even in cases where much more time was needed. So, what's the problem then?

The problem, or better to say: a certain irritation, of some of the independent experts is based on the fact, that the reimbursement corresponds with a predefined, fixed time (in case of IMI2 of half a day) for each remote evaluation, which then defines the reimbursement. I am aware, that the same principle applies for other H2020 programmes as well. My experience as independent observer - not only in IMI - is, that **as a rule much more time is needed** for the remote evaluations and again as a rule this additional time is generously provided by the evaluators. But the sheer notion of a timespan occasionally gives rise to discussions or amazement by the independent experts. Therefore, I recommend to discard any notion of time spans and simply recommend to offer a **flat rate** as remuneration without changing the amount of money. This covers all possibilities: well experienced evaluators, "newcomers", those well acquainted with IMI and those not. And I am sure, in a time full of flat rates elsewhere, this will be accepted without any further questions or discussions.

Hearings

For the consensus meetings two days are foreseen for each topic and generally needed. During the first day the expert panel decides whether to have a hearing or not. In case the panel considers a hearing necessary, the questions, once formulated, are legally reviewed - only clarifying questions are allowed, and must be provided to the secretariat before 6 pm for transmission to the applicants.

Since proposals have to be evaluated "as is" - this is the rule in H2020 applications, no request for additional information could be included.

Again, this procedure is well structured and managed and very helpful.

As part of a panel's deliberations potential questions that would be used in a hearing were prepared but after careful consideration some of the panels concluded that hearings were not necessary. The experts I asked considered these hearings, as well as the discussions initiated by the preparation of the questions, as very valuable.

3. Any other remarks

Up to IMI2 Call 9, two representatives of the industry pre-defined consortium attended to part of the stage 1 consensus meetings in Brussels. After this the industry representatives left the room. The panel discussion then went on until consensus was reached between the independent experts.

This has been changed. Now industry view and expectations are provided via topic specific webinars² with the possibility for the experts to ask questions. This was done without disclosing the identity of the independent experts and **before they accessed and proceeded with the remote evaluation** of the submitted short proposals.

The webinars are an excellent means to provide topic specific industry views in extension to the detailed call text.

But in case of a reassessment of the evaluation procedure, a different approach based upon an increased role of industry representatives could be considered again and valued against the now effective procedure.

4. Recommendation

As outlined, the evaluation procedure is of highest quality with respect to the information provided as well as the execution of the evaluation. Apart from the Consideration under "Any other remarks" I do have only one minor recommendation.

- In order to prevent unnecessary discussions, I recommend to discard any notion of time spans for the remote evaluation of short proposals and for the determination of the remuneration. Instead of this it is recommended to offer flat rates, without changing the amount of money offered.

5. Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the helpful inputs from the independent experts and IMI2 JU staff.

² See <https://www.imi.europa.eu/news-events/events/imi2-call-18-19-webinars>, where the presentations, the recordings and the lists of participants are accessible.