

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

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**IMI2 JU 18th Call for Proposals
Stage 2 Evaluation**

3 - 5 May 2020

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Following the evaluation: 3 - 5 May 2020



Signature and date

7 June 2020

1. Introduction

This report compiles my observations and recommendations as independent observer (IO) of the evaluation of proposals for **stage 2 of IMI2 Call 18**.

Details of the Call, including an overview of the 6 topics as well as references to documents relevant for submission and evaluation have been published on the IMI2 website¹.

As a result of the stage 1 evaluation (October 2019) and in accordance with the IMI2 procedures, in all six topics one proposal was selected as "Best applicant consortium".

These successful applicants were invited to apply for a full proposal for stage 2 in collaboration with the "Industry consortium".

The submission deadline for the stage 2 full proposals was postponed by one week to 02 April 2020 to give the applicants more time for preparation. This was a reaction to restrictions in mobility, caused by the coronavirus outbreak and was in line with the general approach taken by the H2020 framework programme.

For each topic a full proposal was submitted in time.

In a first step the 6 proposals were remotely evaluated in the SEP electronic evaluation system of the European Commission. In a second step these proposals then should have been evaluated in (face to face) consensus meetings in Brussels from 5 - 7 May 2020.

Apart from the postponement of the deadline referred to above, it was further decided to **exchange the consensus meetings to be held in Brussels for remote video conference meetings**. This change was in accordance with Article 20 - Force Majeure of the expert contract. In a notification of IMI2 JU from 17 March - well in time - practical details were given to enable the experts and the IO to adjust to these unforeseen circumstances.

All other parts of the evaluation process, from individual evaluation to reaching consensus remained unchanged.

2. Approach taken by the observer

I attended the video conferences from 5 - 7 May. Prior to that I received additional documents, which had been made available to the experts, in particular to the rapporteurs, which explained in detail their role, their obligations, the deliverables as well as the deadlines.

I got access to the 6 proposals via SEP in the second week of April, to the Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs), immediately after the experts had finished them as well as the Draft Consensus Reports (Draft CRs). The respective deadlines were met.

Instead of the usual procedure in face to face IMI consensus meetings, where the Independent Observer joins the different meetings and moves between them at any time, in this occasion the IMI Office suggested a pre-defined agenda for the Independent Observer. The agenda consisted of six time slots of half day each, which would allow the Independent Observer to spend sufficient time in each meeting. I accepted this procedure for the first day in

¹ See <https://www.imi.europa.eu/apply-funding/open-calls/imi2-call-18>

order to see the pros and cons and then accepted it for the other days as well. The reason for this is, that I noticed, that video conferences require a higher degree of attention and that the continuity facilitated my comprehension of the discussions.

In all cases I was able to introduce myself. The experts were aware of my obligations and I had the opportunity to ask them for support via the chat function of the video conference software (in general during short breaks) and I particularly asked them to give me a feedback via e-mail. I received comments from more than 40% of the experts.

In case of further questions, I was able to clarify them with the help of the Head of Scientific Operations and the Call Coordinator.

3. Overall impression

When I was informed, that the consensus meetings would take place as video conferences I was a bit sceptical. My former recollection and experience with this kind of communication was - although limited - not the very best.

My major concern was whether remote consensus meetings would enable efficient discussions, the formulation of a fair and clear feedback to the applicants and an agreement on consensus, i.e. consensus scores in line with comments to these scores.

At the end of these three days I can say, that I have observed consensus meetings of highest quality, with no difference in outcome compared to face to face meetings and I was impressed by this fact.

There are a number of aspects, which made this possible: The evaluation procedure was well structured and managed, the experts were very well introduced, the moderators did an excellent job. In addition, the experts had the necessary technical as well as communication skills to work in a video conference setting.

The experts' high standard of expertise and the professionalism and dedication of IMI2 JU staff ensured an **impartial and fair review process** according to the procedures published in the IMI2 Manual for Submission, Evaluation and Grant Award and they are in line with the H2020 Grants Manual.

The IMI2 JU evaluation procedure definitely is one of highest quality compared with other international evaluation procedures, I had the opportunity to follow (FP7, H2020).

4. Remote consensus meetings

I will focus on this major difference and further down on matters in relation to the hearings. Other aspects, as the scale of complexity of the evaluation, the support by the IMI secretariat or the workload for the experts I have already discussed in my stage 1 report. They are all still valid.

Format of the video conferences

The six consensus meetings had identical agendas. They started at 9:00 in the morning with a greeting, a short introduction of the experts, followed by a presentation and a briefing of the moderator. During this phase the video cameras in general were switched on, a presentation or text covered approximately 2/3 of the screen, a list of the attendants and

small video inserts together with an overview whether their cameras and/or micros were active was to be seen in a sidebar, a possibility for a chat to all or individual attendants was offered.

These are common features of nowadays video conference systems designed for personal computers, which facilitate to follow up the process in a transparent manner for each participant.

A short introductory phase was followed by a first discussion of the full proposals and the preparation of the hearing questions, which - after a legal review - were transferred to the applicant consortium at 12:30 o'clock.

The meetings were reopened at 13:30 for short presentations and the discussion of the questions. Only the first names of the experts were disclosed, their video cameras were shut off. The hearings ended latest at 15:00.

Then the second round of discussion started with a finalisation of the consensus report, the scoring and the completion of panel hearing and panel meeting minutes. The meetings were closed at approximately 18:00.

Technical aspects of the video conference including back up

No particular and/or expensive technique is necessary for this kind of video conferences. All what is needed is a current standard PC and an environment that respects the integrity and confidentiality of the evaluation process – shared workspaces are not acceptable and the bandwidth of the internet connection has to be sufficient. As far as I could see, this always was the case.

Occasionally there have been small technical problems using the audio connection of the computer. For such cases there was a "back up" of the moderator, a person who followed the discussions and reacted immediately, whenever necessary. Thus, the moderator could fully concentrate on his or her task.

Individual experts and their experience of video conferences

In each topic there have been 5 or 6 experts. Together with IMI 2 JU staff and the IO, at most 10 persons participated in the regular discussions with the exception of the hearings, where up to four representatives of the consortium joined the meeting.

According to my perception this is a manageable number of persons, which makes it easier to discuss and reach consensus. This limited number of attendants, I think, is particularly important for video conferences, lasting for several hours, **which I consider as more demanding as compared to face to face meetings.**

I was interested to learn, what the practical experience and the attitude of the experts to videoconferences was. For this purpose, I made a short informal questionnaire (using the chat function); in addition, I asked them for a more general feedback via e-mail (this was kindly communicated by IMI2 JU staff).

The result is, that under the current situation video conferences are an instrument the individual experts work with on a regular basis, for some of them it is part of their daily work. There was not a single person saying that video conferences were relatively new to them.

However, **the experts are not enthusiastic about video conferences**, they accept them under the current circumstances, but they clearly prefer face to face meetings as they consider these to be, for example, less exhausting, with a better quality of interaction and an easier flow of discussion. **At the same time, the experts clearly state, that the consensus meetings went well.** Different supporting arguments were given: the good preparation of the meetings, the professionalism and excellent support of the IMI2 JU staff and the fact, that 32 of 34 experts had already participated in the stage 1 of this Call.

The crucial role of the draft consensus report

As I have outlined, to conduct a good remote consensus meeting, many prerequisites have to be fulfilled. But there is one thing which I consider as crucial for the whole process. This is the draft consensus report (CR).

One independent expert is appointed as rapporteur. At the closure of the remote evaluation, the IMI Office prepares a compilation of all the Individual Evaluation Reports and sends them to the entire panel of experts. The rapporteur then has two days time to draft a CR and save it in SEP, where it can be read by all individual experts². The deadline for this was 1 May. To my conviction, this was enough time for the experts to prepare for the consensus meetings, with the first two starting the 5 May.

The draft CR reflects the individual evaluation reports, specifies areas of consensus, strengths and/or shortcomings of the proposal and provides a list of potential questions for the hearing, again on the basis of the IERs. It opens the floor for goal-oriented discussions and proposes the phrasing of the final consensus text. Thus, it is a tool, which takes up the Individual Evaluation Reports and makes them easier to handle.

The panel meeting ensured that the key aspects identified by the IERs were all assessed in order to reach a common panel opinion. Thus, during the discussions, the phrasings were mostly structured against the background of this text. Technically this was enabled by the web conference software. The draft CR was the text, which was almost permanently to be seen on the screen and which was constantly revised - by the moderator on behalf of the experts - during the discussions.

I am convinced, that it is the tool of the draft CR which makes it possible to finalize a complex text like a CR and to achieve a consensus on the scoring in one day even under the tight conditions of a video conference.

Hearings

The remote hearings had the same format as the onsite ones, with the exception, that the identities of the experts in the video hearings were not disclosed - in the list of attendants on the screen only the first names of the experts were displayed. After the consortium received the questions there was only one hour time to prepare the response to the questions.

It is quite obvious to split a remote video conference in two parts. The first part could cover an afternoon which ends once the hearing questions have been formulated and sent to the consortium. The second part, starting with the hearing, could take place the next morning.

² Prior to that the rapporteur receives a guiding paper, which explains excellently the role of the rapporteur, respectively her or his task.

This gives the consortium more time to prepare its response and at the same time the experts an opportunity to recover.

The idea of splitting the meeting indeed has been proposed by several of the independent experts.

5. Any other remarks

The video conference technique lacks an immediacy - physically as well as in perception, which we are accustomed to. This has to be compensated, as it has been successfully done in the present IMI2 JU (Call 18, stage 2) consensus meetings. This is fully acknowledged by the experts. The different quality of interaction however, is certainly one of the reasons, that several individual experts, participating in these meeting noted, that they would prefer face to face meetings, because it is this compensation which entails a higher degree of attention, occasionally referred to as exhausting.

No one complained however, the procedure was accepted as the best available under the present circumstances. It simply would not have been possible to finish the evaluation - depending on the actual state of lockdown and given the actual evaluation rules.

But there is one aspect, where video conferences offer opportunities otherwise not available: Long sessions could be split without difficulty and divided into two days for example - it's simply due to the fact, that no travels are necessary.

This leads to the following recommendation.

6. Recommendations

1. Consensus meetings as remote meetings, using a video conference tool are an option, respectively a necessity under the current circumstances of a pandemic. With the organization, the material provided and the management as described in this report and in particular the dedication of the independent experts and the IMI2 JU staff, the video conference format gives equivalent results as compared to onsite face to face meetings. **Nevertheless, if there is a choice, my recommendation is to stay with onsite consensus meetings.**
2. In case of future video consensus meetings however, I recommend to split the meetings and divide them into two consecutive days or half-days, with the formulation and sending out of the questions at the end of the first day and the start of hearings at the onset of the second day.
3. Independent of video- or face to face meetings there is another consideration. Assumed we will have face to face meetings again, in the future it might anyway be reasonable **to have remote hearings as a standard**, the video conference tool for this part of the evaluation is - as has been demonstrated - fully appropriate.

7. Acknowledgements

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