

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2016-09-two-stage

IMI-2 9th Call for Proposals

Stage 2 Evaluation

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Present at the evaluation: February 14-16 2017

Signature and date

March 12 2017

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1. Introduction and approach taken by the observers

This report constitutes the observations and recommendations of two independent observers who followed the evaluation of proposals for stage 2 of the 9th call of IMI-2. The call was published on April 27th 2016.

The submission deadline for stage 2 was 10th January 2017. Stage 1 of this Call with a submission deadline of 26th July had been evaluated in September 2016.

The evaluation was followed to observe 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, the observers give independent advice for possible improvement of the evaluation process. It is not the observer's role to express views on the proposals or the experts' opinions¹.

The call encompassed 6 topics, which were all Research and Innovation Actions with a twostage submission and evaluation process.

Following the completion of remote evaluation and scoring using the SOFIA² tool, the consensus panels met for one day each between 14th and 16th February 2017, with the exception of one topic, which was finished within two days.

As a result of the stage 1 evaluation and in line with the Call text for each topic one proposal had been selected and invited to apply for stage 2, together with the industry consortium, as published in the Call text³.

The observers worked together in the following ways:

- They had access to the proposals as well as further documents via the SOFIA tool and to the remote evaluations, which had been sent to them in advance
- They attended the overall panel briefings given by executive director Pierre Meulien and the head of scientific operations Hugh Lavery at the start of each topic evaluation, and here introduced themselves to the independent experts
- They observed the panel workings, in particular for fairness and for adherence to the principles of evaluation set out in the *IMI-2 Manual for Submission, Evaluation and Grant Award*, see footnote 1

¹ This is the summarized version of the explanations given in the "Code of Conduct for Observers" as part of the observers Contract and the document:

http://www.imi.europa.eu/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/IMI2_CallDocs/IMI2_Manual_submission_evaluation_grant_v1.3_April2016.pdf

² In future Calls (i.e. from the 10th Call on), SOFIA, the IMI2 Electronic Submission (and Evaluation) System will be replaced by the H2020 electronic submission tool SEP (Submission and Evaluation of Proposals support system), see also

http://www.imi.europa.eu/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/IMI2_CallDocs/Manual_SubEvalAward_IMI2_v1.4_Oct2016.pdf

³ See http://www.imi.europa.eu/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/IMI2Call9/IMI2_Call9_TopicsText.pdf

- They informally discussed the views of the independent experts on the peer review process and they had discussions with the head of scientific operations, the call coordinator and one of the legal officers
- They invited all independent experts to contact them with any observations or concerns.

Both observers were present for the three days, and this gave them the opportunity to share experiences from different panels, to gain a good coverage of parallel sessions and to discuss the findings and recommendations.

2. Overall impression

The call topics were as follows:

- Topic 1: Addressing the clinical burden of *clostridium difficile* infection (CDI): evaluation of the burden, current practices and set-up of a European research platform
- (part of the IMI new drugs for bad bugs (ND4BB) programme
- Topic 2: Development of immune tolerance therapies for the treatment of rheumatic diseases
- Topic 3: Data quality in preclinical research and development
- Topic 4: Next generation of electronic translational safety – NEXGETS
- Topic 5: Identification and validation of biomarkers for non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH) and across the spectrum of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD)
- Topic 6: Joint influenza vaccine effectiveness studies.

Since at stage 2 only one proposal has to be assessed, for five of the topics one day was foreseen for evaluation and indeed this was sufficient. In one case two days were planned; we will come back to this under "Other remarks".

As in former two stage Calls, the majority of evaluators - more than 90% - had been active in stage 1 of this Call too. We consider this continuity a great advantage, in particular in relation to the design of the Calls in IMI2.

Since the IMI2 Call 9 the evaluation form offers an additional (fourth) section, called "Any other remarks on this proposal which may be of assistance to the applicants if it is selected for Stage 2 evaluation", see our stage 1 independent observer report, these remarks are transferred to the successful application. This is unique to the IMI2 evaluation scheme and it is related to the fact, that only one proposal is invited to apply for stage 2. The task to combine the pre-existing industry consortium with the winner of stage 1 is demanding; such remarks therefore can be helpful. With a high percentage of evaluators active in both stages of the evaluation it is apparent what the response of the full consortium to these remarks was.

After the briefing of the experts, the consensus meetings started with a first round, discussing the proposal between the evaluators and then formulating questions for the face to face meeting with 4 representatives of the consortium, later the same day.

The consortium representatives only had one hour time to prepare their response to the questions. Immediately after this hour the hearing and the discussion between panel and consortium took place, lasting 1 ½ hours. We want to emphasize, that these hearings were of major importance for clarifications, they enhance the quality and validity of the evaluation and they have been of particular importance for one topic.

The observers are fully confident that the evaluation conformed to the procedures published in the IMI-2 Manual for Submission, Evaluation and Grant Award and are in line with the H2020 Grants Manual. All participants adhered to the published rules and were guided by the IMI scientific officers. The evaluation process is mature and was expertly implemented by IMI staff. Overall, it was a very high quality evaluation.

The independent experts were well chosen to give the right expertise for the complex project proposals. With one exception, panels reached a consensus. For the topic where consensus could not be reached, there was an open vote and the panel finally went with the majority. They all collaborated in preparing the consensus reports. Panels with the support of the legal team efficiently addressed some minor concerns regarding potential conflicts of interest in accordance with the rules governing expert participation.

Minor remarks about the SOFIA tool were not further discussed, since this software tool will be replaced by the H2020 electronic submission tool SEP (Submission and Evaluation of Proposals support system) in future Calls.

3. Any other remarks

As already noted in our stage 1 report, the evaluators did not have any problems picking up the principles for IMI2 evaluation, regarding the nature of the call and of the industry participation. We explicitly asked some of the evaluators again and always got the answer, that they did not have any problems with the process as a whole. After some consideration we think, that the simple explanation for this is, that the evaluators basically observe this is a standard peer review evaluation and the perception of the differences compared to standard scientific programmes is that of the observers. We find it reassuring that the experts adapt and follow the procedures for IMI-2.

It became clear again that the briefings are of major importance. In the first of these briefings (presented by the executive director Pierre Meulien) a couple of general questions came up regarding a) to the circumstances in which the evaluators may consider a proposal might be out of scope and what the implications of this should be (to be answered separately and to be reflected in the scores too), and b) if the evaluators think that a proposal is below threshold values. The answer was, that in such a case, a proposal would not be funded and that this had happened before. The impression we had was that these responses were well received in that they clarified the independent role of the evaluators.

For one of the topics a two day consensus meeting was arranged in order to give generous room for discussion to one proposal which had been submitted under unusual circumstances whereby a question was raised as to whether the proposal was in scope and capable of meeting the objectives as set out in the call topic text.

This was thoroughly discussed within the Consensus group and finally reflected in the set of hearing questions, handed over to the consortium representatives. As a result of the hearing the Consensus group decided that the application was in scope and capable of meeting its objectives. After this fundamental finding the application was discussed and scored in the usual way.

As observers we can say that the evaluation procedure with its questions and means was fully appropriate to handle difficult situations and to allow a fair decision.

We would like to note that in all 6 topics the hearings in particular were most helpful for the evaluators to reach a conclusion. We want to add, that we were impressed by way the evaluators discussed the proposals and how the moderators supported them to reach a fair and independent decision.

The surroundings, refreshments and meals and support from the secretariat and scientific officers were excellent and contributed to the smooth running of the evaluation.

4. Summary of Recommendations

As already stated, this stage 2 evaluation is a well-established procedure, which - and this is our main recommendation - should be followed in the future too. We want to highlight in particular:

- The panel briefings by phone and the in-person briefings with all the experts before they split up into topic groups.
- The standard working of the panels, moderated by IMI scientific officers
- The formulation of questions and the hearings with representatives of the full consortium
- The collaborative production of consensus reports by the independent experts.

Finally, we would like to make a remark with respect to the formulation of topics of a Call. We appreciate, that they are detailed and to the point; we are convinced that on procedural grounds this contributes to a very well manageable number of applications, but it may be in exceptional cases that a very high degree of detail might be counterproductive.

5. Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the helpful inputs from the independent experts and IMI staff.