

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2017-two stage

IMI-2 12th Call for Proposals

Stage 1 Evaluation

Date of evaluation:

28th November – 1st December 2017

Number of pages in this report (title page included): 5

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Present at the evaluation: 28th November – 1st December 2017

IMI2/INT/2018-01606

1. Introduction and approach taken by the observer

This report describes the evaluation of two independent observers whose role was to observe and report on the practical workings of the evaluation process, the conduct and fairness of the evaluation sessions, the application of the scoring criteria and the procedures and their implementation. The modus operandi of the observers is detailed below:

- A telephone pre-briefing from the IMI office was provided the week before the panel, summarising the strategic concept of the IMI calls for funding, its current stage of evolution and the operation of the evaluation process. The pre-briefing also included recommendations for how the observers might work in the panel sessions.
- The seven panels were convened over a four-day period with two days allocated to assessment of each topic. All expert panel members and both observers attended a pre-briefing presentation by the IMI directorate, which set the scene for the operation of the panel assessments.
- Both observers were provided with hard copy of all the applicant proposals, expert panel comments which formed the basis of consensus reports for each proposal, as well as a dedicated room for confidential discussions between them.
- There were seven panels for evaluation of proposals for the seven topics and the observers shared attendance throughout the two days that each of the panels met, across a four day period. Both observers saw the operation of all panels at some point during the evaluation process.
- In addition to observing the panel discussions, agreement of scores and production of consensus reports, both observers listened to telephone hearings with proposal applicants in different panels.
- Both observers informally discussed the panel procedures with several expert panel members and with panel moderators during coffee and lunch breaks.

The details of the call topics are given below:

Topic 1. Development and validation of technology enabled, quantitative and sensitive measures of functional decline in people with early stage Alzheimer's disease.

Topic 2. FAIRification of IMI and EFPIA data

Topic 3. Development of sensitive and validated clinical endpoints in primary Sjogren's Syndrome.

Topic 4. European Health Data Network.

Topic 5. Analysing the infectious disease burden and the use of vaccines to improve healthy years in aging populations

Topic 6. Discovery and characterisation of blood-brain barrier targets and transport mechanisms for brain delivery of therapeutics to treat neurodegenerative & metabolic diseases

Topic 7. European Screening Centre: unique library for attractive biology.

Topics 4, 5 and 6 were evaluated on 28th and 29th November and Topics 1, 2,3 and 7 were evaluated on 30th November and 1st December.

2. Overall impression

Call 12 follows the traditional IMI route for funding, with a topic text defined by the Industry, a Stage 1 evaluation, merging with an industry partner followed by a Stage 2 evaluation. There was a very good breadth of expertise in each panel giving excellent rigour in the assessment process. The panels were well supported by a scientific officer as a moderator as well as having a second scientific officer present. The evaluation process and the evaluation procedures conformed to those published in the IMI guidance literature, primarily the IMI2 Manual for Submission, Evaluation and Grant Signature. The panels operated clear briefings on confidentiality and conflicts of interest and were professionally managed by the moderators. Each panel had pre-selected rapporteurs for each proposal to lead the drafting of consensus reports and feedback to the applicants. The rapporteurs and the moderator produced the reports with agreement from all panel members. Overall, there was vibrant, engaging and very fair discussion of each proposal by the expert panel members. The importance attached to generating consensus reports to rigorously inform the scoring against the descriptive scoring criteria, as well as providing feedback for applicants formed a major part of the panel process. The workings of the panel were conducted with a high level of professionalism and in a transparent manner.

3. Specific comments

Set against a backdrop of a very high quality evaluation process, we have detailed below a number of specific comments that might be useful in developing processes with even greater balance and efficiency:

The pre-meeting telephone briefing by IMI team was useful, but it would have helped to have some information on the calls and summary abstracts of the proposals being assessed, at an earlier stage of the process. The in-site briefings were also useful in setting the scene of the exercise for both the panel experts and the independent observers. The Independent Observers' room was particularly useful to discuss processes in confidence.

The evaluation process is more in depth than several national evaluation procedures that assess proposals of a similar funding magnitude. As such it represents a very high quality evaluation.

The process of holding hearings via teleconference with selected proposal applicants led to some useful panel discussion on the weaknesses in proposals and focused panel members

on key questions that required clarity. In general the hearings worked well and with only a few technical or sound issues. One panel member questioned whether a hearing is a flawed way of assessing, suggesting that there were a number of variables that might influence the outcome of a teleconference. There were also occasions when answers to questions were not possible as only the co-ordinator was available to respond. On balance, the hearings were extremely helpful to the panel discussions and decision-making for scoring and for producing the consensus report.

In one panel there was an initial failure to contact a co-ordinator of a proposal for a hearing. The moderator was able to contact the co-ordinator at an airport and he was willing to respond immediately to questions asked over a mobile link. The moderator and panel handled this difficult issue extremely professionally and the answers were of use to illuminate their assessment of the proposal.

The process of developing detailed consensus reports to arrive at a final score for each proposal is a useful way of debating and discussing each proposal. While we applaud the transparency of this process and the value of feedback to applicants it runs the risk that panels might not have sufficient time ranking the top applications and ensuring the best proposal is identified for funding.

Overall the gender balance of expert panel members across the seven panels was acceptable, though it was noted that some topic panels had a degree of gender imbalance with two panels having only one panel member from a single gender.

The issue of BREXIT was raised in several panel discussions and all moderators clarified that the funding position is currently unchanged for proposals with UK partners. This was reassuring to all assessors.

One of the panels felt that the topic call text was too strict and limiting and questioned its impact. They felt that the clearly defined and detailed Work packages did not leave room for creative manoeuvre by the applicants.

The moderators' were all extremely competent in chairing the panels. However, greater consistency in the role of the moderators could be achieved by sharing of best practice.

The IT system (SEP) supporting the IMI programme evaluation is extremely comprehensive, but because of its inherent complexity guidance on the technical use of the system was needed to enable its full capabilities. This was needed and was provided by the IMI administrative support on the opening evaluation day.

The administrative support from the IMI team was excellent throughout the whole of the panel process. We were very grateful for this level of support.

4. Summary of recommendations

1. We recommend consideration be given to devising a more efficient process to writing consensus reports as these are provided with a high level of detail for all applications regardless of quality. Word limits could be introduced for assessment comments of the expert panel members.
2. We recommend that panels consisting of five or more experts, should always be constituted with at least two members of a single gender
3. We recommend that moderators discuss and share best practice in chairing panel sessions to harmonise the approach that is taken to this task.