

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2018-14-two-stage

IMI2 JU 14th Call for Proposals

Stage 1 Evaluation

Date of evaluation: 3-6 July 2018

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

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Present at the evaluation: Tuesday 3 to Friday 6 July 2018

1. Introduction and approach taken by the observer

1.1 Background

This report describes the Independent Observer's assessment of the evaluation process of the following call:

Call for Proposals: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2018-14-two-stage

Published: 15 March 2018

Deadline: 14 June 2018

Budget: from EFPIA companies and IMI2 Associated Partners: EUR 84 920 360

From IMI2 JU: EUR 82 357 000

This call covers the following topics with a total of 28 proposals split per topic as shown below:

Topic	Proposals
Topic 1: Targeted immune intervention for the management of non-response and relapse	12
Topic 2: Non-invasive clinical molecular imaging of immune cells	3
Topic 3: Development of a platform for federated and privacy-preserving machine learning in support of drug discovery	9
Topic 4: Centre of excellence – remote decentralised clinical trials	4
Total	28

All 28 proposals were eligible.

The report analyses the efficiency of the procedures, the usability of the IT tool, System for Evaluation of Proposals (SEP), conduct and fairness of the evaluation sessions and compliance with the applicable rules.

The objective is to give an independent view and, if necessary, advice for improving the evaluation processes for IMI2 funding.

The IMI2 JU evaluation procedure is organised in two-stages; at the first stage, the Short Proposals (max 30 pages) are evaluated remotely by independent experts and discussed jointly on-site in Brussels to prepare the Consensus Reports. Only first ranked proposal per topic will be invited to submit a full proposal for the second stage where the consortium is required to merge with the industrial consortium into one single consortium.

1.2 Methodology

This report includes observations done during the evaluation period 3- 6 July 2018 in Brussels.

The week before, on 28 June 2018, the Observer was invited to a 45 minutes briefing over the phone, by the Principal Scientific Manager and the Call Coordinator where a power-point presentation was made available in advance. All information regarding the call (call texts, manuals for applicants, link to webinars dedicated to applicants) and about the IMI JU was also provided via e-mail in advance.

At site, the relevant information and supporting documents including copies of all proposals and draft consensus reports were provided to the Observer prior to the start of the consensus meetings, both printed and on a USB key.

This was very useful and perfectly well organised!

Views and observations were gathered through participation in the two general briefings done by the Principal Scientific Manager on 3 and 5 July, in consensus meetings, and through informal discussions with the independent experts, moderators and the Principal Scientific Manager. The aim has been to gather as much input as possible from different sources to get a holistic view of the evaluation process.

2. Overall impression

2.1 Efficiency, reliability and usability of the implementation of the procedures

The IMI2 evaluation follows a standard procedure for their two-stage call and was very well executed given the complexity of the process. The evaluation was run in full coherence with the guiding principles outlined in the documentation.

The evaluation procedure was fully transparent, following the rules outlining the process. All experts are registered in the European Commission central database. The selection of experts was done based on expertise matching the topics and providing as fair as possible balance in terms of gender, nationality, public and private sector and previous experience as evaluator. The Independent Experts selected had all a high scientific level and expertise in their field. IMI2 encounter a specific challenge that the topics are quite focussed and the number of experts in the specific fields often are limited, which, in some cases, makes the gender and geographical balance difficult. Additionally, the generally high number of participants in the applicant consortia also contributed to the exclusion of experts for disqualifying conflict of interest reasons, which also had an impact on the balance. Based on these circumstances, the balance between experts in the four panels was considered satisfactory. The invited experts had to declare any, potential conflict of interest.

The issue with potential conflict of interest amongst the experts was clearly explained prior to the start of evaluations and was properly underlined by the IMI team in the briefing introducing the consensus phase.

A small number of potential conflict of interest were signalled and correctly dealt with by the IMI2 evaluation team. Where the potential conflict was signalled by an evaluating expert, this expert was removed from the proposal in question and did not participate in the consensus meeting.

The evaluation procedures were clearly explained at the two general briefings prior to the two sets of consensus meeting to secure full transparency of the evaluation.

The evaluation process was perceived as highly transparent and the IMI2 staff answered questions around the process in a very open and professional way. This clearly added to the confidence in the procedure and removed any potential uncertainties.

The ratio between proposals and experts is considered to be well balanced. The timeframe to finalise the Individual Assessment Reports (IER) was set to 12 days (15- 27 June 2018). One of the experts for each proposal was selected as rapporteur and prepared a draft consensus report prior to the meeting.

The time set for the consensus meetings was considered enough.

To keep the schedule, moderators have to be efficient and highly professional to keep focus on the key questions where there are disagreements or ambiguities while letting all experts have their say. It is also important that the draft consensus report is well prepared ahead of the meeting to make it efficient.

During the meetings attended, the moderators demonstrated to be highly professional with a very good capacity in bringing out the essential issues to discuss and come to an agreement in due time.

However, one of the panels encountered some difficulties to come to consensus in due time as opinions among experts varied. In this case, the moderator efficiently guided the discussion to secure that the meeting eventually ended in due time with agreement among experts and the minority view of one expert recorded.

In this context it should be noted that on-site consensus meetings are perceived as important to assure a high-quality outcome, even if the time constraint can be challenging. Experts expressed that the possibility to discuss with fellow evaluators is core of the assessment.

The different steps of the evaluation procedures encountered no major delays. The individual assessments and the consensus reports were all finished within the planned timeline. The SEP tool was perceived as efficient and there were no specific comments on the IT tools.

2. 2 Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality

Each proposal was evaluated by at least four different experts to ensure fairness and a balanced view. The importance of giving a personal view on what was written in the proposal was underlined at the briefings. Additionally, it was clearly said that the proposals should be assessed by their own merit and not based on any information that could be found elsewhere or compare the different proposals to guarantee that each proposal is treated equally.

The preparation of the evaluation was well organised and in due time before the remote individual assessments and central consensus meeting. The briefing ahead of the individual assessment included a web-based brief and supporting slides. The web-based brief allowed experts to go back and check the presentation online at any moment, which gave the possibility to double check any uncertainty during the course of the evaluation. The documentation provided to the experts was seen as adequate and of high quality.

Overall, experts noted that they had a good introduction with enough background information to perform the assessments and consensus phase.

2.3 Quality of the IMI evaluation process in comparison with the evaluation procedures of national and/or other international research funding schemes

Based on the experience with similar national evaluation procedures, the current evaluation was professionally run and of high quality. The transparency and confidentiality were at a comparably high level and regarding the complexity of multinational programmes, the procedures are well implemented to secure the best proposals getting through.

2.4 Quality of the evaluation process overall

This evaluation was very well organised respecting all rules on transparency and equal treatment of each proposal as far as possible and keeping the planned time schedule.

The experts were very professional and engaged in their task and ensuring the best proposal to be selected.

The IMI2 JU staff was considered by all experts as highly competent, available and supportive. The few issues observed were around the challenge to reach consensus when views differ. The IMI2 evaluation team took necessary actions in addressing this in a professional and satisfactory way. There was also a high level of openness regarding suggestions for improvement.

3. Any other remarks

The Observer has the following additional remarks, not already mentioned:

- One panel chose to have hearings with four of the proposals. The consortium (coordinator or appointed person by coordinator) received three questions on the evening of the first day to answer at the next day's hearing. Each hearing lasted 30 minutes and were conducted via conference call. The interaction was between the moderator and the coordinator while the experts were on mute to guarantee that experts are anonymous. No additional information was allowed to be introduced beyond that which served to clarify points that were already in the proposal. The hearings were all well performed and fully in line with the guidelines. Experts experienced the hearings as very valuable to straighten out any question marks before giving the final scores.
- The two cases of potential conflict of interest were very well handled and the experts in question did not participate in any part of the evaluation process for those specific proposals.
- The IMI2 JU evaluation team was very professional and competent, responsive to any comments, questions or suggestions and friendly. This created an overall nice work atmosphere.
- The infrastructures and working conditions for evaluators were very good.

4. Summary of Recommendations

The IMI2 JU evaluation process and procedures have an excellent quality and the IMI2 evaluation team is highly professional, competent and well organised.

One suggestion however to consider could be to have dedicated rapporteurs to do the pre-drafting of the consensus report, based on the IERs and then take part of the consensus meeting to finalise the report. In this way, the experts and moderator could concentrate on discussing the proposal and come to conclusions. The rapporteur would not be one of the experts but someone who has very good drafting skills taking the responsibility of writing up a high-quality report. This is a system that is used in other areas with good results in terms of ensuring a smooth consensus phase and taking pressure from experts and moderators so that they can concentrate on their important tasks.

5. Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all the Independent Experts and IMI2 JU staff to share experiences, thoughts and being supportive during the evaluation.