

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2020-22-single-stage

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1. Introduction and approach taken by the observer

This report describes the Independent Observer's assessment of the evaluation process of the H2020-JTI-IMI2-2020-22 single stage call, published on 23 June 2020 with submission deadline on 29 September 2020. The budget is EUR 11 427 098

The objective of this report is to give an independent view and recommendations for potential improvements on the evaluation process.

The IMI2 JU Call 22 was a restricted call for Research and Innovation Actions with the aim to further support research activities in exceptional cases, to enable successful consortia to move onto the next step of the challenge. The call was opened on 23 June 2020. The call was restricted to actions funded under topics published in the IMI2 JU Annual Work Plans of 2014, 2015 and 2016 and further, was limited to actions where the corresponding workplan already informed potential applicants about the possibility of a later restricted call, which in turn resulted in 20 possible applicants. In total, eight proposals were submitted.

The Independent Observer was invited to a background briefing together with the Call coordinator and the Head of Scientific Operations. The meeting took place via a WebEx conference call. All relevant information and supporting documents including the call text, manual for SEP evaluation, IMI 2 Evaluation Guidance for Call 22, links to all relevant key evaluation documents were made available shortly after the briefing, as well as access to the proposals and individual reports in SEP.

Due to the current situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, this was a fully remote evaluation. The consensus meetings were held via WebEx between 28- 30 October 2020. The Independent Observer participated during the full three days of consensus meetings.

2. Overall impression

The overall impression of the evaluation process is excellent. The process was very well organised, fully respecting the rules on transparency and equality in treatment of each individual proposal and respecting the planned time schedule. The documentation relevant to this call to support the evaluation was comprehensive and well received by all experts. In addition, the IMI2 JU Staff was considered by everyone as highly competent, available and ready to support when needed. The challenge with having a full on-line evaluation, for example to have a good balance between the experts in commenting and keep a good atmosphere, was dealt with in a most professional way.

a. Scale of complexity of the evaluation task

IMI2-Call 22 was evaluated in a single stage and fully remotely, following the normal procedures of evaluations. The consensus phase was equally held on-line. In addition, no hearing with applicants was organised. An important specificity with this call was that it was restricted only to certain consortia that met the eligibility criteria outlined in the call text. The individual remote evaluation took place between 1 -21 October 2020. Taking into account the fact that Call 22 encompassed several medicine-related fields thus requiring a rather unique expertise from the evaluators and that the assessment was fully on-line, the complexity of the evaluation is considered as high.

b. Transparency of the procedures:

The evaluation procedure was fully transparent and followed the IMI2 well established rules, which are easy to access via the IMI2 website and the EC Funding and Tenders portal.

All experts involved are registered in the European Commission expert database, and the selection of experts was based on their expertise related to the topics and keeping a fair balance regarding gender, nationality and previous experience as an evaluator.

The eight experts chosen for the IMI2-Call 22 had all a remarkable capacity to evaluate a broad range of different medicine related areas as well as the potential impact of the proposals. The balance between experienced and “newcomers” and nationalities was good. In terms of gender there was a majority of female experts, which in this case could be regarded as positive though there is often a challenge to find a balanced mix of gender.

c. Throughput time of the process and the efficiency of the procedures

The time given to finalise the Individual Evaluation Reports (IER) was considered by several experts as too short as the documentation was quite extensive. The timing for drafting of Consensus Reports, however, was considered to be sufficient.

To ensure a high quality and efficient consensus meeting, it is important that the moderators keep focus on the key issues where there are disagreements between the experts, or ambiguities and let all experts have the possibility to comment. In a remote setting, this is somewhat more challenging to get all experts equally involved and to keep the attention to the important parts. The moderators showed an impressive capacity to manage a well balanced and dynamic consensus meeting for three very intense days.

d. Efficiency, reliability and usability of the implementation of the procedures, including the IT-tools

The moderators had a high level of professionalism and knowledge about the different topics dealt with during this evaluation. The moderators were most helpful in guiding the discussions to be focussed and efficient, and to clarify any potential uncertainty. The evaluation was considered as fully in line with the H2020 guidelines and as indicated in the relevant parts of the IMI2 JU AWP.

The WebEx platform worked very well and there were no connection problems during the meeting. However, the videos had to be turned off to ensure that the connection for everyone should be stable.

There were some comments around the need to further improve the SEP tool to allow for more flexibility and to make it easier to structure texts going from the IERs to drafting of consensus reports.

e. Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality

To ensure fairness and a balanced view, each proposal was assessed by all the eight experts. Ahead of the individual assessments, the experts were instructed to evaluate each proposal on its own merit and only take into account what was written in the proposal. This was then repeated in the introductory brief before the consensus meeting to make sure that every proposal is treated in a fair and equal way.

The experts were also informed of the importance of assessing possible conflicts of interest (Col) at any time of the evaluation, confidentially, and not revealing any information about the proposals or results externally.

The evaluation was very well prepared, well organised and timely with sufficient background information so that the experts would feel confident in performing their tasks in a good way. The experts noted that the “IMI 2 Evaluation Guidance” document provided ahead of the assessment, was extremely valuable and useful to draft high quality Individual Evaluation Reports and draft Consensus Reports.

The moderators were very well prepared and cautious that all criteria, including sub-criteria, were applied in a coherent manner. The texts per criterion were first agreed between the experts before the scoring, to ensure consistency between the text and the scores.

f. Conformity of the evaluation process witnessed with the evaluation procedures published in the H2020 Grants Manual

The evaluation process was fully in-line with the evaluation procedures published in the H2020 Grants Manual.

g. Quality of the EU evaluation process in comparison with the evaluation procedures of national and/or other international research funding schemes

The IMI2 evaluation process is of high quality, very professionally run and conscious about details, comparing to similar experiences with national procedures. The level of transparency, equal treatment and confidentiality is high with a professional and efficient procedure in place, making sure that the best proposals will be funded.

h. Quality of the evaluation process overall

The overall quality of the evaluation process is very high. Considering that this call had a high level of complexity, with a wide breath of topics covered and that each expert had a rather high workload, the process ran smoothly. The experts had an impressive level of knowledge, highly engaged and professional, ensuring that each proposal was duly assessed, and the best proposals selected. All experts considered the IMI2 staff as highly competent, encouraging, and ready to support when needed. Also, the staff welcomed any suggestion on how to improve the evaluation process.

3. Any other remarks

The observer has the following addition remarks, not already covered:

- The documentation provided ahead of the evaluation was of high quality and comprehensive. The annotated “IMI2 Evaluation Guidance” was highly appreciated as facilitating well written IERs. As the evaluation was fully on-line, the briefing before starting the consensus meeting was organised via WebEx. The briefing was very clear and concise.
- All experts had a very good understanding of the specificities of this call, the procedures of the evaluation including their role. There was also a high level of understanding of the criteria and scoring scheme among the evaluators and in the few cases of doubts, the IMI2 staff was supportive to guide the experts.
- In this call, all experts assessed all proposals, hence the group of experts had together a very good overview of the proposals. Although the workload of each expert was quite high, the fact that everyone had assessed all proposals gave a good and balanced view of each proposal based on the different expertise and background of the evaluators.
- Several of the experts noted that the time allocated to each individual assessment was short, considering the amount of information to evaluate. Some experts also suggested to further improve the structure of the evaluation template in the SEP tool to include also the sub criteria to facilitate the structuring of the IER and CRs.
- The consensus meeting was challenging in terms of timing as the schedule was ambitious and the days became long. However, the level of engagement from the experts was impressive, and all-in-all, the process ran smoothly. The final panel discussion was fully transparent and fair and the quality of the final reports was very high.
- Three days of full on-line meeting can be challenging to keep the concentration and several experts noted that the schedule was too ambitious. More breaks should have been planned between the different proposals as the days become intense. However, most experts expressed a preference to on-line evaluations as they considered it to give more freedom and less time consuming as no travelling is involved.
- No conflict of interest was notified.
- The restricted call model as used in the Call 22, was appreciated by all experts and considered very useful and should be further explored in the next-coming programming period.

- Thanks to the well prepared and professional IMI2 evaluation team, the overall work atmosphere was very pleasant and with a good team spirit! The group of experts also had a very good dynamic between them and all experts stated that they very much enjoyed the exercise.

4. Summary of Recommendations

The evaluation of the IMI2 JU Call 22 was very well performed overall quality of the evaluation process is very high.

The experts brought forward a few suggestions to consider for the future:

- ✓ The time allocated to the individual assessment might be reconsidered to allow for more time per proposal
- ✓ Online meetings require a certain “code of conduct” to allow everyone to speak, e.g using the raising hand symbol and reminding the participants to be clear and to the point in their interventions. It might be helpful for any future full online consensus meeting to provide the experts with guidelines how to run an efficient online meeting. Such guidelines could also include recommendations for how to structure the discussions.
- ✓ When having full online meetings time management is key with a clear time schedule communicated ahead of the meetings and making sure that the time is respected by all participants. Being online for three full days is very challenging and it is therefore important to find a good balance in time dedicated per proposal.
- ✓ Regular shorter breaks need to be included in the schedule to keep up the concentration and also allow for some physical movements.