

## **IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT**

**Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2020-23-two-stage**

**Stage 2 Evaluation**

**Date of evaluation: 13 - 15 April 2021**

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**Present at the evaluation: 13 to 15 April 2021**

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## 1. Introduction and approach taken by the observer

This report describes the observations and assessments of the observer of the evaluations of the below-mentioned topics as follows.

Submission deadline (FP): 17 March 2021

Total available budget: 95 150 000 EUR

Total number of proposals evaluated: 06

Total number of experts involved in the evaluation: 34

Topic number	Topic description	Submitted proposals
1	Returning clinical trial data to study participants within a GDPR compliant and approved ethical framework	1
2	Modelling the impact of monoclonal antibodies and vaccines on the reduction of antimicrobial resistance	1
3	A platform for accelerating biomarker discovery and validation to support therapeutics development for neurodegenerative diseases	1
4	Optimal treatment for patients with solid tumours in Europe through artificial intelligence	1
5	Shortening the path to rare disease diagnosis by using new born genetic screening and digital technologies	1
6	Behavioural model of factors affecting patient adherence	1

This report concerns the monitoring of the H2020-JTI-IMI2-2020-23-stage 2 Evaluation.

The Independent Observer (IO) was appointed by IMI2 JU to observe and to give independent advice on the conduct and fairness of all phases of the evaluation sessions. The IO's role is to ensure a high degree of transparency, on the ways in which the experts, the consortium representatives, the IMI2 JU staff and other actors apply the evaluation criteria and to identify the best practices with which the procedures could be improved. This report reflects the activities in covering the remote and central virtual meetings including briefing meetings, consensus meetings, preparation and hearings, conducted for the H2020-JTI-IMI2-2020-23-stage 2 Evaluation.

- The approach taken by the IO to perform his tasks was the following:

1. During the remote phase, the IO assessed the general briefing material sent out to the experts. The observed result was considered appropriate, and the deadlines for submitting the Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs) set for each topic were met by all the experts. In one of the topics the deadline was extended until April 9<sup>th</sup> (instead of April 7<sup>th</sup>).

2. The IO observed all steps of the central virtual evaluation in order to 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. Based on the IO's observations and on the comments made by consortia representatives, experts, and IMI2 Scientific Officers, the report suggests some improvements to the evaluation process.

In execution of his tasks, the IO performed the following activities:

- Attendance to the consensus meetings, including experts' briefings, hearings with consortia representatives, and finalisation of consensus reports.
- Interviews of randomly chosen experts (11 of 34), as well as consortia representatives (7 of 24) in order to have their feedback about the whole or specific parts of the evaluation process, their interactions with IMI2 Scientific Officers and other IMI2 staff, as well as assessing their potential needs.
- Several discussions/exchanges with the IMI2 staff, the Call Coordinator and the Head of Scientific Operations.

## 2. Overall impression

Given the topics, call text and call requirements, the evaluation process of the above-mentioned topics may be considered as a complex exercise. All actors interviewed, namely experts, consortium representatives, IMI staff, and IO confirmed that the process was executed in accordance with established procedures as presented in the relevant guidance and manuals available in a timely and effective manner.

During the consensus meetings, experts showed good knowledge of their field and its state-of-the-art. Overall, all interviewed experts expressed high level of satisfaction of the expertise of their colleagues.

The IO also observed the whole evaluation process. The evaluation process included briefing of experts before the start of the individual evaluation, IERs, online consensus meetings including hearings with applicants, and final panel review meetings. All the consensus meetings were conducted remotely through WebEx conferencing tool.

In execution of his tasks, the IO took the following approach: (1) Participated in the remote briefings of the topics; (2) Reviewed the briefing material; (3) Checked IERs and scores in relation to the drafting of the Consensus Reports (CRs); (4) Extracted reports from SEP and read several CRs; (5) Exchanged emails with the Call Coordinator, panel moderators and experts; (6) Interviewed experts, consortium representatives and Scientific Officers; (7) had meetings with the Head of Scientific Operations and the Call Coordinator. Based on these observations, recommendations are provided at the end of this report.

A total of 34 experts participated in the evaluation of the six proposals. One of the experts participated in more than one topic. The number of experts per topic ranged between 5 and 8, depending on the expertise required for covering all the different fields under each topic.

The observing period started on 18 March 2021 with the remote individual evaluation followed by virtual central evaluation and ended on 20 April 2021 with the last interview. The IO interviewed 11 experts and 3 Scientific Officers. Some experts were reached by email and others by phone. The IO's e-mail address was provided to all experts by the Scientific Officers at the IO's request.

### a. **Scale of complexity of the evaluation task:**

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the evaluation process was carried out completely remotely and online, which increased the complexity of the task in scheduling teleconferences for all briefings, consensus meetings, consensus reports' checking and final panel meetings. The duration of the whole consensus evaluation lasted 3 days, i.e. two topics per day. All evaluation steps required great commitment from all actors and precise timetables: from the availability requests of experts to their recruitment, contracts signatures, allocation of proposals to experts, handling potential conflicts of interest, submitting IERs, drafting of CRs, consensus meetings, quality check of CRs, finalisation and approval of CRs, and lastly, finalisation and approval of the panel meeting minutes. All these activities were carried out efficiently and effectively.

All experts were satisfied with the planning and execution of the evaluation even if very few experts said that, due to the lack of time, sometimes the Scientific Officer had to press for an answer. In some occasions experts were contributing in different manner, and although that is normal, maybe the Scientific Officer could have taken some attention in trying to get every expert's opinion more often. It was observed that the panels of experts had a good mix of competences and backgrounds representing multidisciplinary, hands-on knowledge and expertise coming from higher education research, public bodies and private for profit organisations. The gender balance was not adequate in all panels, with women representing 60% of the total number of experts. The selected independent experts were knowledgeable and committed to their tasks. The IO was assured and satisfied with the overall organisation, the high quality of moderation (the modus operandi and its implementation) and the experts' consensus discussions, including the application of the award criteria and respective justifications, and finally, the performance of the used IT tools (also the experts shared this view).

### b. **Transparency of the procedures:**

The transparency of the evaluation procedure and results was recognised by the experts and confirmed by the IO. The consensus meetings within each topic panel (involving experts and Scientific Officers/moderators) were carried out in an open and transparent atmosphere, with a comprehensive presentation of different and specific points of view, generally clearly stated and extensively motivated.

**The evaluated topics:** The topics were challenge-based, providing flexibility and space to applicants, through 'Expected impact statements'. The experts were asked to assess this potential contribution. Finally, a balanced approach to research and innovation is expected, with emphasis on activities operating close to end-users and the market. The experts were duly informed on the procedures, evaluation process, scoring and its meaning, deadlines, and tools to be used – SEP for evaluation (IER and CR drafting), and WebEx for the online consensus meeting.

**Panel Briefing and consensus meeting:** All panels started with a briefing meeting and an introduction of all participants. It was observed that in the panels where the briefings were detailed and the topic text well explained, experts had less operational and semantic topic questions and performed with certainty. The consensus evaluations were conducted based on the H2020 Vademecum evaluation rules and IMI manual for evaluation, submission and grant award. In the panels attended by the IO, the Scientific Officers always facilitated the process and made efforts to stay impartial, asking the experts to decide all together and to reach consensus and a consensus score. The Scientific Officers encouraged discussions to highlight the proposal's strengths, weaknesses and/or shortcomings and based on the comments to decide on a consensus score. Panel meeting minutes were drafted by the Scientific Officer and approved by the experts via the WebEx chat function.

**Hearing between the panel of experts and the consortium representatives:** each hearing lasted 90 minutes and was comprised by four consortium's representatives, the panel of experts (with their identity hidden in order to ensure their anonymity) and two Scientific Officers (moderator and back-up).

The IO confirmed that the process was executed in accordance with IMI Call 23 Stage 2 Hearings guide in a timely and effective manner. Some experts expressed concern that the lack of direct interaction with the consortium representatives (within a videoconference context) made it difficult to obtain clear answers to some of the questions.

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

Considering the evaluation of 6 proposals by their assigned experts, the panel moderators (IMI Scientific Officers) monitored closely the panel advancements to ensure timely completion of all CRs. It was observed that many topics had long working days starting at 8:30 and ending well after 18:00. Most of the panels/topics continued non-stop for 3-3.5 hours.

The 6 rapporteurs strongly indicated that they need around a half-day (4h instead of 1.6h) to remotely draft the CRs.

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

All meetings were held through the WebEx tool. The overall quality of connectivity to the WebEx was satisfactory despite few connectivity and sound issues. Unfortunately, most of the time the experts were asked to have their cameras off to improve connectivity. However, this impaired effective communication. The WebEx meetings were scheduled outside SEP. The experts used the SEP system without any technical issues. The CRs were approved by the experts in SEP and the panel meeting minutes were prepared and approved by the experts via the WebEx chat function. Anyhow, the Scientific Officers were always available to provide feedback and reply to questions raised by the experts and they were well prepared and transparent. The online management of the evaluation reporting from consensus to final reports was well respected.

The throughput time of the process and the efficiency of the procedures offered some margin for improvement.

e. ***Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality:***

The evaluations were fully carried out with impartiality and fairness of the selected experts. The main point about equal treatment is that each proposal was properly discussed by the experts. Confidentiality was fully respected.

All procedures were put in place to ensure an impartial, fair, transparent and confidential evaluation. Experts were asked to declare any potential conflict of interest at any time of the entire evaluation and to ensure confidentiality of all information.

No Conflict of Interest case was reported at the consensus meeting phase.

The organisation was adequate. Each expert received adequate material in the beginning of the remote evaluation. The information was fully accessible and the procedures were well explained.

The evaluation process was deemed to be robust, transparent, fair and consistent with open and detailed online discussion on criteria and sub criteria to ensure clarity of issues arising and that a consensus was achieved. Still, many experts had the opinion that the remote nature of the consensus meetings slightly affected the evaluation as compared to face-to-face meetings. The experts would prefer to continue with the face-to-face consensus meetings.

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

The evaluation process has been observed with reference to the applicable H2020 rules and guidance documents, and the processes do always comply with and uphold all rules. The evaluation procedures were conducted in accordance with the background documents listed below. All contingency measures put in place due to the Covid-19 situation, including the decision to organise the consensus phase remotely, were duly communicated to the external experts. The Scientific Officers were properly prepared. Experts were invited to read the following background documents:

- briefing webinar materials
- guidance documents
- Hearing-Briefing notes to consortium
- IMI2 Call 23<sup>rd</sup> Call Text
- Evaluation Form annotated
- role of rapporteur

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

The evaluation process was seen to be of high quality by experts when compared to similar national and other international evaluation procedures. Experts appreciated the consensus process and the multidisciplinary and high expertise panels, interactions and the role of the Scientific Officers.

h. ***Quality of the evaluation process overall:***

The IMI2 Call 23 Stage 2 Evaluation was successfully completed, in line with all the rules and guiding principles of H2020 including Vademecum, IMI Manual for Submission, Evaluation and Grant award. All proposals were evaluated and scored in a transparent, fair and impartial manner. The overall quality of the evaluation was observed as being best practice with active discussion and diligent evaluation of all aspects of each proposal. The IMI staff have performed an exemplary remote evaluation process. Accordingly, the evaluation process was observed to be of high quality and demonstrated consistency, fairness and transparency.

### 3. Any other remarks

#### In summary:

- The briefing material provided to experts beforehand was useful.
- Experts had a good understanding of their role, the topic (context, scope), the evaluation process and the scoring scheme. However, it was important that experts were reminded of these during the briefings, before the consensus processes began, to ensure their alignment with all requirements and criteria. The hearing phase was not a satisfactory step for the experts. It would be worth to find a way to improve interactions between experts and consortium's representatives.
- The allocation of experts to proposals in terms of geographic representation, expertise, relevance, previous experience was exceptionally well executed. The IMI staff have spent considerable time in selecting, recruiting and supporting the experts in their evaluation tasks (individual and consensus). For the next evaluations, the IMI staff should pay special attention on ensuring that gender balance reached. All IMI staff were polite, courteous and considerate towards experts and the IO.
- The independent experts did not complain about the remuneration.
- Overall the quality of IERs was satisfactory, however it can be further strengthened. Likewise, the drafting of CRs can be further improved. The IO sampled 4 final CRs and they were found to be consistent with their attributed scores.
- SEP is not a very useful tool for drafting CRs, it would be worth to edit, copy and paste on it.
- Regarding the IMI2 JU funding to legal entities established in non-EU/H2020 associated countries, it was opined by one independent expert that their dissenting vote should constitute a veto and that no budget should be allocated to participants from countries which have any European Council decision related to sanctions.
- Rapporteur payment: 4 out of 6 experts acting as rapporteurs respectfully pointed out that it takes several hours to review the aggregated IERs, as well as prepare a solid draft CR before the panel meeting. The additional payment for this task is 90 Euros, but the work is worth at least a half day of additional pay (225 Euros).

### 4. Summary of Recommendations

The IO deems this IMI2 Call 23 Stage 2 Evaluation process successful, transparent, fair and at the highest standard possible based on the H2020 rules. The IO suggests that IMI2 JU may consider the following recommendations to further strengthen and streamline the proposal evaluation processes (the recommendations generated for Stage 1 should be combined to the following ones).

1. Before the general and consensus meeting:

- a. Selection of the Rapporteur: Given the role of the rapporteur, Scientific Officers should take into consideration the required skills for this role when selecting an expert to act as rapporteur.
2. During the general briefing:
    - a. Reiterate the responsibilities of the rapporteur (drafting based on the IERs, complete the CR based on the comments during the consensus meeting, provide the CR with the final comments and scores based on the consensus meeting, finalising the CR based on the quality control feedback).
    - b. Re-emphasise the confidentiality required, stressing that experts must be in a room where there is no one else over listening to the consensus meetings.
    - c. Give further guidance on what is considered a weakness and what is a shortcoming; how they must be recorded and scored. It is recommended therefore that some guidelines are provided of what is meant by “a small number of shortcomings”.
  3. During the consensus meetings, it is recommended that:
    - a. The Scientific Officer or the rapporteur shows to the experts the scoring table when the panel is about to give the consensus score.
    - b. Re-emphasise to the experts to be in a quiet environment during the consensus meeting.
  4. The role of ‘quality controller’ is well described through Vademecum on H2020 submission and evaluation procedure but neither the Vademecum nor the IMI manual for submission, evaluation and grant award specify who in the staff has to take this role; to avoid confusion this might be detailed somewhere.
  5. The additional payment for the Rapporteur task is 90 Euros, but the work is worth at least a half day of additional pay (225 Euros). It is reasonable to request IMI2 JU to consider this point.

In closing this report, I would like to thank the IMI2 JU staff, the Call Coordinator, the Head of Scientific Operations for their excellent support before and during the central evaluation. Every effort was made to assist me, to explain the relevant context and to provide me free and unrestricted access to all information and documents, thus demonstrating a high degree of transparency. Their support, their assistance and their kindness throughout the entire process were outstanding and contributed greatly to making the observation work not only a smooth but also a very enjoyable exercise.