

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2019-19 - single-stage Evaluation

**Restricted Call to maximise impact of IMI2 JU objectives and
scientific priorities**

Date of evaluation: Monday 21st to Tuesday 22nd October 2019

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Present at the evaluation: Monday 21st to Tuesday 22nd October 2019

1. Introduction and approach taken by the observer

The call for proposals for Research and Innovation Actions under H2020-JTI-IMI2-2019-19-single-stage was opened on 26 June 2019 and closed on 26 September 2019. In total, five proposals were submitted to the call and reviewed by the panel of independent experts.

Prior to the on-site evaluation, the observer was provided with a wealth of helpful documentation about the call and associated procedures including the call text, manual for submission, evaluation and grant award, and links to the call-specific webinar. All important documents were made available to the observer. Printed versions of proposals were also made available during the consensus and panel meetings. In addition, the observer participated in a teleconference on the 2 October 2019 with the Head of Scientific Operations and the Call Coordinator to be fully briefed and to ensure that any questions about the call or procedures could be raised prior to the on-site evaluations.

The on-site observations for IMI2 Call 19 started with attendance at the general briefing meeting on the morning of 21 October 2019. The observer was introduced to the experts who were encouraged to provide feedback and suggestions on the process at any time.

In addition to joining the evaluation discussions, the observation was supplemented through conversations with individual experts, rapporteurs, moderators (IMI scientific officers) and members of the secretariat and the legal teams. Daily notes were taken to form the basis of this report. The observer was invited to meet with the Head of Scientific Operations and the Call Coordinator on the afternoon of the second day of the evaluation, 22 October 2019, to share early insights and to seek any clarifications needed.

The observer reports that the practical workings of the evaluation process ran very smoothly, the evaluation sessions were conducted in a very fair and timely manner, and the award criteria were applied and the appropriate procedures were implemented.

2. Overall impression

The observer was satisfied by the overall efficiency and excellent organisation of the evaluation process – both with regards to the remote evaluations and the on-site evaluations. The IMI website provides all relevant call documents and provides links to detailed guidance. The observer noted that it was easy to find the relevant information via the IMI website. It is clear that significant time and effort has gone into making the website as user-friendly as possible. The general atmosphere of the evaluations was one in which professional constructive debate was encouraged and every expert was given the opportunity to make his/her voice heard.

a. Scale of complexity of the evaluation task:

Call 19 (single stage evaluation) was assessed both remotely and on site. The remote evaluation started on Friday, 27 September and ended on Tuesday, 15 October 2019. Onsite single-stage evaluations took place from 21 to 22 October 2019 in Brussels at the IMI premises with the help of independent external experts. There was a good balance between male and female experts who were drawn from Europe and further afield.

At the start of the on-site evaluation, the experts were briefed on the evaluation procedures and were once again reminded to declare any conflicts of interest or potential conflicts of interests. Following this briefing, the panel discussions started wherein the rapporteurs who had been assigned a priori, presented each proposal. The experts had the option to schedule a hearing wherein they could request clarification on points that had been raised in the proposals. However this option was not considered necessary for any of the proposals submitted. The evaluation schedule was well planned to maximise best use of time.

b. Transparency of the procedures:

The call topic text is very detailed and provides a high-level of transparency on IMI2 JU, the nature of the public private partnership with industry, and it was very easy to find related documents to support applicants. There was a convincing level of transparency applied to all stages of the call and subsequent evaluation process. Discussions with the experts during the two days of the on-site evaluations confirmed that there is high confidence in the fairness, professionalism and transparency of the overall evaluation process.

The evaluation process was fully transparent and followed the established rules. All experts are registered in the European Commission central database. The selection of experts was done based on expertise matching the topics and providing an as fair as possible balance in terms of gender, nationality, public and private sector and previous experience as an evaluator. The Independent Experts selected all had a high scientific level and expertise in their field. IMI2 JU may 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. The mix of experts was considered satisfactory.

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

The workload and time given to evaluators for their work remotely was sufficient. The time set for the consensus meetings was equally distributed among all of the five proposals. To keep the schedule, moderators were very efficient and highly professional to keep focus on the key questions where there were disagreements or ambiguities while letting all experts have their say. 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.

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

During the onsite evaluations, the observer was impressed by the IMI moderators' knowledge on all aspects of the call and the general rules. This knowledge was essential to keep experts focussed on relevant discussion areas. The evaluation was run in full coherence with the guiding principles outlined in the documentation.

Evaluation-related reports are shared using SEP. The Consensus Reports were drafted on the second day of the evaluation, with the contribution of the onsite IMI evaluators prior to being finalised in SEP.

The IMI2 JU 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. All of the five proposals were read and evaluated by all the experts. The timeframe to finalise the Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs) was set to 19 days (27 September to the 15 October 2019). One expert for each proposal was selected as rapporteur and prepared a draft consensus report prior to the meeting.

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

e. Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality:

Each of the five proposals was evaluated by all the experts who were all present during the on site evaluation. This ensured 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 stated 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 webinar and supporting slides and documents. The webinar 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. Moderators provided a good overview of the process at the outset of the panel and were diligent in their efforts to ensure that no single voice dominated the discussions – often seeking input directly from those experts who were not as vocal to ensure that all views were shared and considered. A brief tour de table was carried out in the panel which is a good idea to make clear the specific areas that each of the participating experts represents.

The moderators for this panel were very careful to ensure that the evaluation criteria were consistently applied. In all cases, comments were agreed first and then scores agreed on the basis of the strengths and weaknesses identified for each. Moderators were careful to stress that the call text must always be considered when providing comments. Indeed, at several points the moderators referred experts back to the call text by sharing their screen to make sure that the discussion points reflected the exact call specifications. The invited experts clearly had extensive subject knowledge and demonstrated professionalism throughout the process.

The evaluation panel gave due consideration to all criteria – not just scientific excellence. In most cases, the three criteria were considered as independent parameters and both moderators and experts were careful to avoid penalising a proposal twice for the same issue.

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

Yes, the evaluation process conforms with the evaluation procedures published in the H2020 Grants Manual and as per the website: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/grants_en.htm.

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

Based on the experience with similar 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.

h. 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. There was also a high level of openness regarding suggestions for improvement.

3. Any other remarks

The quality of the documentation provided to experts beforehand was very good, in the form of a webinar and access to the documentation on the IMI website and on SEP. The on-site briefing session was very clear. All experts were very experienced and had a very deep understanding of the call (context, topics), of the evaluation process and their role and of the award criteria and scoring scheme. The allocation of experts to the respective proposals was appropriate and balanced with regards to gender, geographic area, sector, and relevance of expertise.

The process of the individual evaluations and the actors involved was overall satisfactory, with a broad spectrum of expertise covering health economics, clinical pharmacology, neuroscience, psychiatry, geriatrics, biostatistics and many other fields. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the call topic, experts from a variety of backgrounds were invited to participate. It may not be possible, but for future evaluations it may be good to try and have more than one expert for various areas. However, given the very niche nature of some of the expertise required the observer recognises that this may not be feasible. There were no instances of conflicts of interest.

There was the possibility and time allocated to carry out hearings, and this was addressed at the very start of the first working day, just after the briefing. There was unanimous agreement there was no need of further clarification for any of the 5 proposals, so no hearings were held.

The evaluators and moderators were all working in one large room with a very good IT system and a projector. The observer was even given a spacious room adjacent to the room allocated to the evaluators, which could be used when any of the evaluators or IMI staff needed to hold private meetings with the observer.

The process of the consensus meetings was very thorough with the participation and contribution of all of the experts and the moderators, in spite of the restriction of time, as identified above. The criteria and scoring scheme were appropriate, complete, relevant, clear, and were consistently applied. The process of the final panel meeting and the actors involved was very transparent and fair, and the quality of evaluation reports was very high and satisfactory.

The evaluation participants praised IMI staff for always being responsive, hospitable, approachable and highly knowledgeable and very competent. IMI staff also took care to provide a helpful reminder to experts on their last day about how to claim for their remote and onsite evaluation activities and encouraged experts to get in touch if they experienced any difficulties in uploading items in the system for reimbursement. Given the strike being held at the Brussels airport on the last day of the evaluation (when most of the evaluators and the observer was planning to leave Belgium), the officer in charge of reimbursement provided her own contact number and reassured those travelling that appropriate measures were in place to dampen the disruption caused by this inconvenience.

4. Summary of Recommendations

The evaluations were very well administered and there are just one modification that the observer can suggest to optimise the process. This regarding the fact that more time (possibly another afternoon/day) could have been allocated, in the event of hearings taking place on the day following the evaluation of each single proposal. In this particular evaluation, the process was successfully completed in time because the morning of the 2nd day which was initially set aside for a potential hearing was not in fact needed for any hearing. Therefore it was possible to continue the discussions on the second day, after the whole portfolio of the 5 proposals was separately evaluated in depth on the first day.

Nevertheless if hearings had been held or if there had been a larger number of proposals submitted, then there may not have been sufficient time to ensure that the comments and scores were fully aligned for each proposal.

Throughout the whole of the evaluation process, it was very clear to the observer that every proposal was given a very fair and thorough evaluation, and only the excellent proposals (2 out of 5 proposals) made it above the threshold and were funded, even though there was remaining allocated budget.