IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

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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 follow.

Submission Deadline: 29.09.2020

Total available budget: 95 150 000 EUR

Total number of proposals submitted: 56

Total number of ineligible, inadmissible and withdrawn proposals: 02

Total number of proposals evaluated: 54

Total number of experts involved in the evaluation were above 42

Topic number	Topic description	Submitted proposals
1	Returning clinical trial data to study participants within a GDPR compliant and approved ethical framework	09
2	Modelling the impact of monoclonal antibodies and vaccines on the reduction of antimicrobial resistance	02
3	A platform for accelerating biomarker discovery and validation to support therapeutics development for neurodegenerative diseases	04
4	Optimal treatment for patients with solid tumours in Europe through artificial intelligence	19
5	Shortening the path to rare disease diagnosis by using new born genetic screening and digital technologies	06
6	Behavioural model of factors affecting patient adherence	14

The number of submitted eligible proposals has been published in the Funding & Tenders Portal, for each of the six topics under ***Call updates*** section.

https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/evaluation/backoffice/evaluationsessions/17956934/monitoring.html

In execution of Independent Observer (IO) task, IO took the following approach:

The role of the independent observer (IO) is to observe and monitor the evaluation process and assess whether the experts applied the evaluation criteria in a consistent, fair and impartial manner following the H2020 rules. The observer' role is also to notify IMI staff of issues that may arise during the evaluations. The objective of this report is to provide an independent assessment of the evaluation process, as well as, to provide recommendations for improving future evaluation processes. It must be noted that these specific consensus evaluation procedures were executed remotely in their entirely. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, it was not possible for the independent observer to meet face-to-face with the experts during the consensus phase. However, the independent observer attended remotely many panel briefing meetings, consensus meetings and Panel Review meetings.

Also, for better assessing the whole evaluation process IO used the following links to the IMI website with the key evaluation documents:

§ IMI 2 Manual for evaluation, submission and grant award

§ IMI 2 Summary of most relevant provisions for participating in IMI2 actions

§ Call Text

§ Webinars for applicants

2. Overall impression

The independent observer was appointed by the IMI2 JU to observe the whole evaluation process. The remote evaluation process included briefing of experts, individual evaluation reports (IER), consensus meetings, online consensus report drafting, ranking list review and final panel review meetings. As the whole consensus evaluation process was conducted remotely through the web conferencing tool WebEx, the observer relied on attending as many as possible remotely held consensus meetings and briefings, reading the work-programme and call-topic texts, investigating in the SEP system, reading IERs, rapporteur drafts reports as well as, studying the materials shared with him such as briefing presentations, topic-planning, email correspondence with the experts. The observer was requested to observe and report on the practical execution of the evaluation process, on the conduct and fairness of the evaluation sessions, on the application of the award criteria and scores, and as well as on the procedures and their implementation, including IT tools. Based on these observations, recommendations are provided at the end of this report. In execution of his task, observer took the following approach: (1) Participated in the Remote General 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 consensus reports; (5) Exchanged emails with the call coordinator, panel moderators and experts; (6) Interviewed experts and moderators (Scientific Officers); (7) meeting with Head of Scientific Operations.

The observing period started on 29 September 2020 with the remote individual evaluation followed by virtual central meetings including Experts Briefing session and ended on 26 October 2020 with the last panel review meeting. The IO interviewed 14 experts and 2 moderators. Some experts were reached by email and others (04) by phone. The observers' e-mail address was provided to all experts by the moderators at the observers' request. Only 11 experts directly contacted the observer by email.

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

The evaluation task was complex considering the number of topics, eligible proposals and number of experts to be scheduled, allocate them to proposals based on their expertise, provide them access and follow-up on their work. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this evaluation process was undertaken 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 5 days. 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 conflicts of interest, submitting individual evaluation reports (IERs), drafting of consensus reports(CRs), consensus meetings, quality checking of consensus reports, finalisation of consensus reports, approval in SEP, and lastly, finalisation and approval of the panel review report. All these activities were carried out efficiently and effectively. All experts expressed satisfaction concerning the planning and execution of the evaluation. 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 geographic spread was adequate with all the majority of experts coming from EU member states. However, having overseas experts added to the complexity of timing of the consensus meetings. Overall the gender balance was adequate in most panels. Each panel had a good balance of experienced and first-time experts. The selected independent experts were knowledgeable and committed to their tasks. The evaluation procedure is complex and includes various steps tied together. The evaluation process was well explained by the scientific officer in charge via the video conference briefing at the start of each panel. At all stages relevant documents and reminder emails were provided. In addition, one-to-one support was offered via e-mail by the IMI staff to the evaluators as needed. The IO was assured and satisfied with the overall organization, 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:*

Overall, in all topics the execution of all consensus and ranking procedures were clear and transparent. Every panel commenced its work with a briefing and explanations by the moderator. All the moderators were coherent and explained the procedures in a transparent manner.

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, e.g. demonstration, piloting or proof-of-concept. Beginning of the Evaluation Process: The experts were duly informed on the procedures, evaluation process, scoring and its meaning, deadlines, and tools to be used – SEP for evaluation, and WebEx for the CR phase. Experts received an initial email with information on their contracts and reimbursement, followed by an e-mail from their panel moderator dealing with general briefing and a topic briefing. Further to these, all experts received the PowerPoint presentation of the specific topic briefing and guidelines for preparing the Individual Evaluation Reports.

Panel Briefing: All panels started with a briefing meeting and an introduction of all participants. It was observed that in 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 evaluations. In most panels, the moderators 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. In several panels, the moderator started the consensus meeting by showing the individual scores; whereas in others the moderators encouraged discussion to highlight the proposal's strengths, weaknesses and/or shortcomings and based on the comments to decide on a consensus score. The experts were satisfied with the ranking lists. Panel review reports were drafted by the moderator and approved by the experts via the WebEx chat function.

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

Considering the evaluation of 54 proposals by their assigned experts, the panel moderators monitored closely the panel advancements to ensure timely completion of all consensus reports and ranking lists. It was observed that many topics had long working days starting at 8:30 and ending well after 18:30. Most of the panels/topics continued non-stop for 4-5 hours. In these panels, where all experts were asked to be present continuously, found this tight schedule very demanding and even exhausting. Very few experts said that the

tiredness may have affected their judgement at the end of the day. Moreover, all actors (moderators and experts) found the staring in screens without seeing their fellow experts quite strenuous.

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 very 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 issue, except of very few new experts who did not know how to view their IERs once submitted and they were assisted by other more experienced experts. Many panels drafted the CRs in Word, which was then sent to the controllers for quality check. The quality check was also performed in Word. The CRs were submitted and approved in SEP. The Final Panel Reports were prepared and approved by the experts via the WebEx chat function. It was observed that the briefing material has slight differences among the panels; as for example some included the interpretation of the evaluation scores; however, it did not always include a clear distinction or definition among the “weakness”, “shortcoming” and minor shortcoming. Anyhow, the moderators were always available to provide feedback and reply to questions raised by the experts and they were well prepared and transparent. The on-line management of the evaluation reporting from consensus to final reports was well respected. The experts applied the scoring table consistently. It was observed that experts needed to be reminded many times of the scores meaning and the difference between weaknesses and shortcomings. At the end the whole process was satisfactory.

e. *Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality:*

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.

Immediately at the start of the individual evaluation process, experts were asked to check for Conflict of Interest (CoI) as described in the Annex I of their contracts. In case a CoI was reported by the expert, the moderator assessed the CoI situation with the legal team and a final decision was taken depending on the type of CoI: (i) exclusion from the entire evaluation; (ii) participation in the individual remote evaluation (without assessing the conflicted proposal) but not in the consensus meeting; or (iii) participation in the entire evaluation including consensus meeting (without assessing the conflicted proposal and without participating in its discussion).

There was only one CoI case reported at the consensus meeting phase, in one topic at the end of the first day. The expert was excluded from the second day of the panel meeting, the CoI was encoded in SEP and the expert’s IER for the conflicted proposal was cancelled and not taken into consideration in the final consensus report. The other panel experts confirmed that the situation did not change the score and comments agreed for the proposals discussed during the first day of the meeting.

Many experts had the opinion that remote consensus meetings affected neither the evaluation nor the fairness as compared to face-to-face meetings. However, most experts would prefer to continue with the face-to-face consensus meetings. 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.

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 moderators were properly prepared. Experts were invited to read the following background documents:

- briefing webinar materials

- guidance documents

- Evaluation Form annotated

- role of rapporteur

- call text

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 role of the moderators. Very few experts (2 of 42) said that they preferred other evaluation schemes where they provide a grade. Overseas experts used to other evaluation processes said they did not see the point of continuing the evaluation and consensus process if a proposal failed the excellence criterion.

h. *Quality of the evaluation process overall:*

The IMI2 Call 23-2020, Stage 1 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 eligible proposals were evaluated, scored and ranked 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. Despite the large number of topics (6), 54 eligible proposals and 42 experts, 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

Having an entirely remote online evaluation process and working from home/office was a recent experience to both experts and some moderators. Despite this, the evaluation process went very smoothly with open communication via the evaluation system (SEP), email and WebEx meetings.

In summary:

• The briefing material provided to experts beforehand was useful.

• The video briefing sessions held by the panels were comprehensive and helpful to all experts new and experienced.

• 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 begun to ensure their alignment with all requirements and criteria.

• An important level of respect was shown by all experts of others' opinions and views. Very few cases were observed where experts were monopolising the consensus meetings. In these cases, the moderator intervened and politely invited the rest of the experts to provide their opinions. The following sentences said by majority of experts: "moderators were excellent and they helped us in staying focused in the call

text, answering questions and guiding the discussions while at the same time letting the experts discuss freely".

• The allocation of experts to proposals in terms of gender, geographic, 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). All IMI staff were polite, courteous and considerate towards experts and observer.

• The criteria and scoring scheme ensured a fair assessment of the proposals. The moderators during the online consensus meetings encouraged experts to justify their scores and openly discuss their reasoning.

• The independent experts did not complain about the remuneration but about the time allocated for the evaluation; too much proposals for very time limit. Given the lacking of time; it was not possible for rapporteurs to really understand the nuances of the comments so that they could be compiled. Ultimately the consensus meetings being longer as the rapporteur may not have had sufficient time to carry out the compilation in detail. - The time allocated for reading full proposals was considered by all interviewed experts (new and experienced) as inadequate as many proposals are complex and have extensive appendixes. Experts strongly suggested additional time per proposal. Moreover, the remote phase should include at least 3 week-ends (Saturday & Sunday).

• A handful of experts would prefer a different non-number-based scoring scheme.

• Overall the quality of IERs was satisfactory, however it can be further strengthened. Likewise, the drafting of CRs can be further improved. The observer sampled several final CRs and they were found to be consistent with their attributed scores.

4. Summary of Recommendations

The observer deems this IMI2 Call 23-2020, Stage 1 consensus evaluation process successful, transparent, fair and at the highest standard possible based on the H2020 rules. The observer suggests that the IMI may consider the following recommendations to further strengthen and streamline the proposal evaluation processes.

1. 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. Emphasise the confidentiality required, stressing that experts must be in a room where there are no one else over listening to the consensus meetings.
    c. Stress that the proposal must be evaluated on its own merits.
    d. Clarify 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".

2. Increase the time allocated to the individual remote evaluation of proposals, and leave enough time to rapporteur for compilation of comments. Also experts strongly suggested that the remote phase should include at least 3 week-ends.

3. An early check of one individual evaluation report per expert by the assigned Scientific Officers four days after the individual evaluation process commences, will catch experts' misunderstandings and it would improve the quality and efficiency of the process.

4. Topics with an exceptional large number of proposals, may consider using all the decimal points of the scoring scale to help the experts and ease further the ranking.

5. During the consensus meetings, it is recommended that:

    a. The moderator reminds experts about the call requirements.
    b. The moderator or the rapporteur shows to the experts the scoring table when the panel is about to give the consensus score.
    c. Ask experts to be in a quiet environment during the consensus meetings and panel review meetings.

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6. The role of 'quality controller' is well described through Vademecum on H2020 submission and evaluation procedure but the Vademecum or the IMI manual for evaluation does not specify who in the staff has to take this role, to avoid confusion this might be detailed somewhere.

Finally, the observer would like to warmly thank the call coordinator, moderators and IMI staff for their welcoming, willing and open approach, which without it, their task would have been impossible.