

## IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVERS' REPORT

**Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2018-15-TWO-STAGE**

**IMI2 JU 15<sup>th</sup> Call for Proposals  
Stage 2 Evaluation**

**June 5-6, 2019**

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**Present at the evaluation: Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> to Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> of June, 2019**

## Summary of the stage 2 process

As a result of the stage 1 evaluation of short proposals (SP) responding to Call H2020-JTI-IMI2-2018-15, the top ranked proposal for each of the 8 call topics were invited to prepare full proposals in cooperation with the relevant industry partners to be evaluated during the second stage of the evaluation process.

The submission deadline for full proposals (FP) was 15 May 2019. The consortia for all 8 of the successful stage 1 proposals responded and introduced a FP by the submission deadline.

The FPs were allocated to the individual experts for a remote evaluation. The experts from the first stage of the process were, wherever possible, brought back to provide consistency.

Each independent expert wrote an individual evaluation report, and the rapporteur for each topic panel summarized and merged all remarks by subject, keeping in mind the subdivision of main criteria excellence, impact and quality and efficiency of the implementation, in order to produce a draft consensus report.

On-site hearings and evaluations took place at Covent Garden in Brussels on June 5 and June 6 2019. Both days started with a general briefing in which the experts were reminded of the main goals of IMI and the evaluation criteria and rules.

Panels started their work with a round table introduction of the experts, all confirming the absence of any conflict of interest associated with their participation. The panels then proceeded with a discussion of the full proposals and started contributing to the corresponding consensus reports collectively. Based on these discussions, the panels prepared questions for the hearing sessions to seek clarifications on particular aspects of the proposal where needed. After review by IMI staff, the hearing questions were transmitted to the consortium representatives comprised of a mix of academic and industry partners, who had one hour to prepare their answers.

The hearings and related discussions between the panel and the consortium occurred in the afternoon during which the consortium was able to provide a brief presentation of the project and address the specific questions asked by the evaluation panel.

The panel meetings were finalised by reviewing and adding comments to the draft consensus reports, scoring the proposals based on the strengths and shortcomings identified, the clarifications provided during the hearings, and writing the panel hearing report.

## Approach taken by the observers

Two weeks prior to the stage 2 on-site evaluation, the observers were provided with the agendas for the panels and received access to all submitted documents via the SEP evaluation system. Printed versions of proposals were made available during the panel and hearing meetings.

The observers attended the general briefing meetings, where they presented themselves and confirmed their full availability for listening to comments or remarks on the fairness and effectiveness of the evaluation process. Experts were encouraged to provide feedback and suggestions on the conduct of the process at any time.

In addition to joining the evaluation discussions, the independent observation was supplemented through conversations with individual experts, rapporteurs, moderators (IMI Scientific Officers) and members of the secretariat and the Legal Team. Observers also had a short talk with some representatives of project consortia directly after the hearings, in order to obtain their impressions on the overall conduct of the evaluation process.

Daily notes were taken to form the basis of this report. The observers were invited to meet with the Head of Scientific Operations and the Call Coordinator on the afternoon of June 6, 2019 to share early insights and to seek any clarifications needed.

The observers did not attend the subsequent ethics evaluation, but had the chance to meet and have a chat with the Scientific Officer responsible for the organisation of the ethics panel.

## Overall impression

As mentioned in the report on the stage 1 evaluations which took place in mid-November 2018, the independent observers were very impressed by the overall efficiency and excellent organisation of the evaluation process, both with regards to the remote and the on-site evaluations. The IMI website provides all relevant call documents and provides links to detailed guidance. The observers found all the relevant information easily 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 debate was encouraged and every expert's voice was given the same weight. Moreover, suggestions made in the stage 1 observation report appear to have been already implemented, demonstrating that IMI acts quickly to address recommended improvements to the overall evaluation process.

The experts clearly had extensive subject knowledge and they demonstrated professionalism throughout the process. Through a review of selected Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs), it was clear that the experts had thoroughly reviewed each proposal assigned to them and adhered to the principles of the assessment.

## Scale of complexity of the evaluation task

The timing and preparation of the hearings, the hearings themselves and the writing of the consensus reports and the meeting minutes were effectively organised. This evaluation differed from those in stage 1, where both one-stage and two-stage type (IMI 15 and IMI 16) call evaluations were simultaneously undertaken. The work on 5 and 6 June 2019 covered only one type of evaluation process, which consistently simplified the process and made it more straightforward to coordinate.

The consortia leading the top proposals for each of the eight topics evaluated in stage 1 had three months to prepare their FP. The experts carrying out the stage 2 evaluations were, wherever possible, the same experts as in stage 1 (except for a few instances where the original expert was unable to participate due to scheduling difficulties or to conflict of interest). The experts represented complementary know-how and they communicated in a very professional and constructive way. As the majority of experts knew each other from the stage 1 evaluations, the discussions were more straightforward and efficient.

## Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality

Moderators strictly followed the evaluation rules and were careful to stress that the call text must always be considered as a reference document when providing comments. The evaluation panels gave due consideration to all criteria – not just excellence. The three acceptance criteria were considered as independent parameters.

The Observers took the initiative to ask some consortium representatives for their impression on the conduct of the hearing process. Of those that were asked, consortium partners were generally impressed by the quality of the expert panels, but said that they would have preferred the opportunity to seek clarifications on the questions they had to answer, to avoid confusion and the potential to spend time preparing answers that were not really relevant to the questions. The hearing questions are deliberately intended to be open ended to avoid yes or no answers but rather to allow the consortium to provide a more fulsome response. However, this appears to enhance the risk of misunderstanding among the consortium members in some cases.

One of the consortium members interviewed also stated that they would have preferred to attend the hearing with more project team members. However, the provision of panel questions one hour before the hearing is intended to provide the consortia with sufficient time to contact remote partners for input to answers and, as the hearings are scheduled well in advance, there should be no difficulty in obtaining specific information from those not onsite.

## Efficiency, reliability and usability of the evaluation process and documentation

The observers were impressed by the professionalism of the IMI moderators and the whole management team. The previous observers' recommendation (see report of stage 1) to mitigate risks associated with emailing draft consensus reports between the moderators and the legal team had been taken into account and a new procedure had been implemented for stage 2 whereby draft reports are shared by memory stick leading to better data security. All other evaluation-related documents were shared using SEP.

The predominant part of the phase 2 evaluation process lies in the remote assessments and the drafting of the consensus report. Indeed, if the consortium has done a good job during the 3 months of preparation of the full proposal, the stage 2 evaluation will frequently lead to a positive outcome. Due to the complexity of the full proposals, IMI provides the full consortium the opportunity to participate in a hearing as part of the stage 2 evaluation to confirm some details or to provide clarifications.

One proposal failed to achieve a score above threshold during the stage 2 evaluations. This proves that stage 2 is not just rubber stamping the outcomes of stage 1, and that indeed the detailed proposal provided by the full consortium outlining how the project will be implemented is as carefully reviewed as the short proposal.

Some minor technical problems were encountered during the hearings. In one case the remote control was defective at the start of a PowerPoint presentation by the consortium representatives, and in another case several attempts were necessary to obtain a proper link with a consortium coordinator who wanted to join remotely with video conference. The latter issue had an external cause (a poor phone connection on the applicant side).

## Workload and time given to evaluators for their work

Panel members were asked to provide their views on the workload and the time allocated evaluation of full proposals. Generally speaking the evaluators found the estimation fair, but felt that the time required for reading and analysing the remote FP was somewhat under-estimated. Indeed, several panel members indicated that they spent "double" time, i.e. one more day to achieve a full and profound understanding of the proposal.

## Ethics evaluation

From call IMI14 onward, a major change in the conduct of ethics evaluation (screening) was introduced whereby in-house meetings were held at IMI, a week after the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage (or single stage) scientific evaluation.

Compared to previously used tools (teleconferences and the WEBEX screen sharing system), the in-house method better addresses the needs of a straightforward conduct and is aligned with the approach applied for scientific evaluations. This change significantly improved the quality of discussions and the clarity of the consensus reports containing in general a set of requirements to be addressed by the consortia during the Grant Agreement preparation phase and during the project implementation. These requirements are well defined within Horizon 2020 guidance, available within SEP and made proposal-specific during the ethics in-house discussions.

## Summary of Recommendations

The evaluations were very well administered and there are just a few minor modifications that we can suggest to optimise the process. These are outlined below.

- The prepared hearing questions should be short and simply worded, but unambiguous. While the hearings are an opportunity offered by IMI, IMI may still consider whether they should allow the

consortium the possibility to request clarifications about the hearing questions during the one hour provided to prepare their responses.

- While in rare cases it can be impossible to avoid the need for consortium members to participate in the hearings remotely, IMI may wish to reinforce the message that this is not the preferred approach. Consortia are given ample notice of the evaluation and hearing dates and every effort should be made to ensure that those participating are able to attend in person. More specifically, the consortium representative who does the PowerPoint presentation should be physically present.
- Check all technical material before starting sessions. We propose that a moment of double-check by the moderator together with the speaker is scheduled, just before the 90 minutes hearing starts.
- Consider an alternative way to estimate the amount of time that experts need for remote evaluation of full proposals, for example as a function of the complexity of the FP, the estimated budget, or its number of pages instead of a fixed number of days that is equal for all topics.
- Consider if observation of the Ethics Panel would have an added value to the overall effectiveness and transparency of the evaluation process.