

IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: H2020-JTI-IMI2-2020-21-single-stage

Development of therapeutics and diagnostics combatting coronavirus infections

Date of evaluation:

22nd April – 24th April & 28th April 2020

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Present at the evaluation: 22nd April – 24th April 2020

28th April 2020



I. Kitchen, 7th May 2020

1. Introduction and approach taken by the observer

The evaluation was undertaken to observe and report on the practical workings of the evaluation process and on the conduct of the evaluation sessions, on the application of the award criteria and on the procedures and their implementation, including IT tools. Based on his observations the observer has provided independent advice for improvement of the evaluation process. The modus operandi of the observer is detailed below:

- A telephone pre-briefing from the IMI office was provided four weeks before the panel, summarising the strategic concept of this particular IMI call for funding, the anticipated number of applications and the nature of the operation of the evaluation process. This was required to be carried out exclusively by videoconferencing due to lockdown across Europe as a consequence of the global Coronavirus pandemic. The independent observer had previously acted as an observer in IMI calls and was familiar with general IMI principles for evaluation and funding of proposals.
- One day before the panel evaluation a further briefing using videoconferencing software was conducted to ensure there was familiarity with the use of the IT systems and the logistics of the remote panel assessment process.
- The observer was provided access via the EC evaluation tool (SEP) to all the applicant proposals, expert panel comments and ratings which formed the basis of consensus reports for each proposal.
- Because of the large number of eligible applications (123) the proposals were divided between 6 sub-panels to arrive at agreed ratings and consensus reports for each application assessed over a 3-day period.
- A further final panel review meeting was held 3 days later, after review of the Evaluation Summary Reports of the highest ranked proposals to determine those to be approved for funding under this call. Included in this final review were all proposals above the call threshold score plus proposals failing in one evaluation criterion with a 3.5 score. In total 23 applications were ranked in this final meeting. The panel review meeting comprised two representative experts from each of the six sub-panels (selected to include experts who had reviewed the final review meeting proposals) and also included sub-panel moderators to provide input to the process where necessary. The final ranking decision and feedback was made exclusively by the expert panel members.
- During the 3-day assessment period of the sub-panels, the observer remotely attended five of the six sub-panels for a period of half a day each. At the end of the 3-day sub-panel meeting a pre-briefing teleconference was held to brief expert panel members and the independent observer about the operating process for the final panel review meeting including the prioritisation criteria for funding, conflicts of interest and the practicalities of the cross-reading exercise of the proposals. The observer also attended during the whole day of the final panel review meeting.

- As the remote evaluation process did not allow the observer to discuss panel procedures with the expert panel members or with panel moderators during coffee or lunch breaks as would normally be the case, an opportunity was offered to experts to e-mail the observer outside of the panel meetings with any comments in relation to the evaluation process, the conduct of the consensus meeting and the panel review meeting, the procedures and implementation including IT tools.

2. Overall impression

Call 21 was a single stage call to deliver therapeutics and diagnostics combatting coronavirus infections. Because of the large numbers of eligible proposals submitted to the call six parallel sub-panels were convened to reach an initial consensus ranking of the applications. Each sub-panel comprised 7 experts and 2 dedicated rapporteurs and in each sub-panel there was a very good spectrum of expertise typically including virology, epidemiology, respiratory, clinical, physician, engineering, public health, regulatory, safety and biostatistics specialisms. In each sub-panel typically 4 experts pre-assessed each application and consensus was achieved on ranking and comments between the 7 sub-panel members. The panels were well supported by a scientific officer as a moderator and a second scientific officer was present at all panel meetings. The evaluation process and the evaluation procedures conformed to those published in the IMI guidance literature, primarily the IMI2 Manual for Submission, Evaluation and Grant Signature. The final panel review meeting was led by a Scientific Operations co-ordinator and was supported by all of the sub-panel moderators. The 12 representative experts from the sub-panels reflected a very good spectrum of expertise.

At the outset of the sub-panel meetings the IMI team provided clear briefings collectively to all sub-panels on the overall process and the importance of confidentiality and conflicts of interest. In addition, the sub-panel moderators provided an excellent introductory summary briefing presentation on the nature of the call, the breadth of the areas which would be considered for funding and some very good summary information on the balance of the applications and overall initial scoring assessment by panel members

Each sub-panel had two pre-selected rapporteurs for every proposal to lead the drafting of consensus reports and feedback to the applicants. The rapporteurs and the moderator finalised the consensus reports with agreement from all panel members. To ensure consistency across the sub-panels' moderators worked to a common checklist and they made especial efforts to ensure a level playing field in the evaluation process. In instances of conflict of interest individual sub-panel members were moved to a virtual waiting room to ensure confidentiality in the remote working process. Overall, I observed a very fair and detailed discussion of each proposal by the expert panel members. The importance attached to generating consensus reports to rigorously inform the scoring against the descriptive scoring criteria, as well as providing feedback for applicants formed a major part of the panel process. The workings of the panel were conducted with a high level of professionalism and in a transparent manner.

The final panel review meeting was also conducted with the highest level of professionalism and rigour and ensured consistency of review and feedback on the proposals selected from the sub-panels. The cross-reading discussion of the proposals was extremely robust and the review made some adjustments to wording of the evaluation summary reports and where necessary some amendments to the scores. Overall, I observed a very fair and detailed consensus discussion. The final panel review meeting wholly satisfied the purpose of ensuring consistency of assessment across the sub-panel reviews.

Although there were a few IT challenges carrying out the assessment by remote video-conference, in particular in relation to maintaining video contact, audio communication was mostly excellent throughout the evaluation. Where there were connection problems the moderators and expert panel members moved quickly to resolve the issues using other routes of communication (e-mail and mobile phone). The remote assessment did not compromise, in any way, a fair assessment process.

3. Specific comments

Set against a backdrop of a high-quality evaluation process, I have detailed below a number of specific comments that might be useful in developing further the IMI evaluation processes in particular in relation to instances where remote evaluations are necessary:

- There were some differences in how each sub-panel used the remote video-conferencing software. Some used only the video facility for introductions and ran the assessment using only audio with strict use of muting unless an individual was speaking. Others had a more open approach with video and audio being “open” for most expert panel members. In general, the approach of using audio only led to a more timely and efficient process to arrive at consensus.
- Each sub-panel operated to the same agenda to ensure consistency of assessment between the panels. One sub-panel identified specific proposal numbers to be assessed in identified time slots and this was very useful in focusing the expert panel members to delivering consensus on each component of the assessment in the required timeframe. This also helped to ensure that the time devoted to each application was very consistent.
- The process of developing detailed written consensus reports to arrive at a final score for each proposal is a useful way of debating and discussing each proposal. Whilst I recognise and acknowledge the value of open discussion of proposals I felt that sometimes a disproportionate amount of time was devoted to wordsmithing consensus reports compared to discussing and debating the scoring of proposals against evaluation criteria. On occasion, the domination of providing very precise sentences of feedback rather than trying to arrive at an accurate scoring of the proposal was very evident.
- For five of the six sub-panels the two rapporteurs were chosen from different countries. One sub-panel had rapporteurs from the same country.

- It was only possible to observe five of the six sub-panels because at the scheduled time for observation of one panel their work had been completed.
- It was noted that despite an equivalent workload the completion of the tasks of the sub-panels varied by up to 6 hours and half of the sub-panels overran time during the 3-day meeting. A tighter regulation of the length of deliberations for each proposal would have been advantageous.
- There were 123 applications to rank and each of these applications was given extensive discussion within the sub-panels. As a process where a small number of applications will be funded a quicker way of handling those applications that clearly fall well below the funding threshold would have been beneficial.
- There was a very large difference in the level of funding requested across the applications and even for those that achieved scores above the threshold this was also evident. The issue of value for money was raised in some sub-panels and this comparison is a challenge when the amounts requested are so different.
- Overall the gender balance of expert panel members across the seven sub-panels (30% female and 70% male) and every sub-panel had at least two female panel members. The gender balance of the final review panel was 25% female, 75% male.
- Several expert panel members provided feedback by e-mail to the independent observer and very many expressed their appreciation of the thoroughness of the process of evaluation of the proposals plus the excellent support they received from panel moderators. Some commented on how surprisingly well the remote evaluation process had worked but also they felt that face to face evaluation is still the best way to carry out this evaluation.
- An expert panel member raised a concern about a potential conflict of interest for a fellow expert in their sub-panel. This was passed to the Head of Scientific Operations who immediately initiated a review by the IMI call coordination and legal teams. A detailed assessment of the issue was carried out and appropriate action was taken in advance of the final panel review meeting. This matter was handled with the highest level of professionalism and confirms how seriously IMI take matters of conflict of interest.
- The work of the panel moderators and the administrative support from the IMI team was excellent throughout the whole of the panel process and the remote evaluation systems worked well despite the obvious challenges that this type of communication can cause.

4. Summary of Recommendations

1. I recommend a more structured timed agenda for assessing proposals in the panel meetings is adopted in an effort to devise a more efficient process to writing consensus reports. In particular, I recommend identifying agenda time slots for reviewing each proposal which are adhered to.
2. I recommend greater focus is given to scoring the proposals in the formal agendas and that consideration should be given to determining the proposal scoring as a basis for completion of the consensus report comments, rather than vice-versa.
3. I recommend that where proposals are remotely ranked low by the majority of experts in the initial pre-panel meeting assessments these should be allocated only a minimum amount of time to arrive at a consensus report.
4. I recommend where two rapporteurs are appointed in a sub-panel they should be selected from different countries wherever possible.
5. When using remote evaluations, I recommend primarily using audio (with strict muting procedures when not talking) to maximise the efficiency of arriving at consensus between experts.
6. I recommend that expert panel members are routinely provided the e-mail contact details of the independent observer to make confidential comments on the panel process. This worked very well in this remote evaluation and should be adopted when evaluations return to normal face to face meetings.
7. There were some occasions where the start times of the sub-panels was brought forward or put back. For any future remote evaluations, I recommend panel moderators should contact the independent observer to advise of any changes in the timing of the agenda to facilitate the role of the independent observer in logging in to remote sessions.