IMI2 JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVERS' REPORT

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

IMI2 JU 15th Call for Proposals

Stage 1 Evaluation

November 12-15, 2018

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Present at the evaluation: Monday 12 to Thursday November, 2018

Summary of call and response

H2020-JTI-IMI2-2018-15-TWO-STAGE Evaluations

In total, 42 proposals were submitted to Call H2020-JTI-IMI2-2018-15-TWO-STAGE. Of these, 3 were ineligible leaving 39 proposals to be reviewed. The call was opened on 18 July 2018 and the submissions deadline was 24 October 2018. The indicative call budget is comprised of EUR 214 847 000 from EFPIA and IMI2 Associated Partners and EUR 171 875 862 from IMI2 JU.

Remote evaluation took place from October 25th to November 7th. Onsite evaluations took place from November 12th-15th,2018. Those proposals selected to move to the second stage of the evaluation process will be submitted by 15 May 2019.

Approach taken by the observers

Prior to the on-site evaluation, the observers were provided with a wealth of helpful documentation about the call and associated procedures including the call text, FAQs, and links to call-specific webinars. All submitted documents were made available to the observers via SEP. Printed versions of proposals were also made available during the consensus and panel meetings. In addition, the observers participated in a conference call with the Head of Scientific Operations and the Call Coordinator 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 15 started with attendance at the general briefing meeting on the morning of November 12th, 2018. The experts received a review of the evaluation procedures and were once again reminded to declare any conflicts of interest or potential conflicts of interest that may be identified during the on-site evaluations. The observers were 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 team. 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 November 15 to share early insights and to seek any clarifications needed.

Overall impression

The observers were very impressed 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 observers were struck by how easy it was 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 debate was encouraged and every expert's voice was given the same weight.

Scale of complexity of the evaluation task

On-site evaluations for proposals submitted to IMI2 Call 15 (stage one of a two stage call) took place from November 12-15 in parallel to the evaluation of proposals submitted to IMI Call 16 (single stage call). This required that the briefing for experts on the 14th of November covered two types of evaluation processes. The information presented in both briefings was comprehensive and consistently described. The timing of the evaluations was well planned to maximise best use of time with the availability of experts.

Workload and time given to evaluators for their work

The throughput seemed to work well for all panels with most experts receiving between 2-6 proposals to review. As the proposals were allocated to experts in SEP soon after the submission deadline, those with 2-3 had ample time to carry out their assessments. However, those with a higher number of proposals to review found the assessment period relatively short. This was particularly the case for IMI2-2018-15 Topic 2 on Blockchain. This topic had significantly more proposals to review in comparison to other panels which had a workload impact for both the moderator and experts. It should be noted though, that both the moderator and experts reviewing Topic 2 proposals demonstrated the same level of diligence and attention to detail for their allocated proposals despite having more work to carry out.

Transparency of the procedures

The observers were impressed by the level of transparency applied to all stages of the call and subsequent evaluation process. Discussions with many of the experts during the four days of the on-site evaluations confirmed that there is high confidence in the fairness, professionalism and transparency of the overall evaluation process.

The call information is very detailed and provided a high-level of transparency on IMI, the nature of the public private partnership with industry represented by EFPIA, and it was very easy to find related documents to support applicants. However, the actual process of how specific call topics are defined could be made more visible to support transparency.

Despite the independent observers being introduced during the briefing session, some experts were still unclear as to the relationship between the independent observers and IMI. In future it might be helpful to stress that independent observers are not IMI staff during the briefing(s).

Efficiency, reliability and usability of the evaluation process and documentation

During the onsite evaluations, the observers were impressed by the IMI moderators' knowledge on all aspects of the calls and the general rules. This knowledge was essential to keep experts focussed on relevant discussion areas.

On a technical note, the video conference and beamer apparatus that were made available to link in experts joining remotely and for any required hearings did not always work properly.

All evaluation-related documents are shared using SEP. However, once the Consensus Report has been collectively drafted, it tends to be shared via email with onsite IMI actors for review prior to being finalised in SEP. The observers recommend that rather than sending draft CRs via email that a mailing feature within SEP might be implemented to ensure data security. The observers are fully aware that adding new functional within a system such as SEP will not be immediate and will depend on many factors. However, we recommend that this functionality be suggested with SEP developers at an appropriate juncture.

Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality

Moderators provided a good overview of the process at the outset of each 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 all panels which is a good idea to make clear the specific areas that each of the participating experts represents.

The approaches adopted by moderators in each panel varied slightly in terms of how the discussions were run but all were very careful to ensure that the evaluation criteria were consistency applied. In many cases, experts also demonstrated a keen self-awareness of the need to be consistent and fair in their comments and subsequent scoring of each proposal. 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. 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.

The evaluation panels 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. It was, however, difficult for some experts to imagine how a good impact or implementation of a given project might be realised in the event that the scientific excellence was not optimised. The moderators were careful to address these views and ensured that the principle of criteria independence was upheld during the briefing meetings.

A small number of participants took part remotely which had varying degrees of success. The use of Webex for these was a bit patchy and it was occasionally difficult to hear the remote participants when they were speaking depending on the quality of their equipment at the remote location. However, moderators did their best to encourage remote participants to speak loudly and directly into their microphones to ensure that they were audible.

The potential to hold hearings to clarify any issues identified in the submitted proposals was considered a very useful mechanism to ensure that the proposal taken forward was the most appropriate candidate for successful implementation. Moderators were careful to ensure that experts drafted questions that sought only clarifications on the proposal text and did not seek to gain new information. Moderators provided very clear guidance on how the hearing process would be carried out to ensure that the identity of reviewers was not accidentally disclosed.

Despite the fact that invited experts had been urged to check for potential conflicts of interest at all stages of the evaluation process – from signing their contracts, to accepting proposals to review in SEP, through to being asked again during the on-site briefing sessions – there were still two cases where experts had failed to spot conflicts. Through discussions with the moderators for each topic concerned, the observers are confident that the experts involved were not in any way trying to undermine the evaluation process but simply had not fully understood all instances which may be considered a conflict of interest. As there are many points in the process where experts are reminded what might constitute a possible conflict of interest and are reminded to consider whether they have any, it is difficult to know how this situation might be ameliorated. It must be noted that in each case where a conflict was identified during the course of the evaluations, the moderators acted with professionalism and diplomacy and the associated experts were excused from the rest of the proceedings.

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

Overall, the evaluations conformed to the published IMI Manual for submission, evaluation and grant award very well. The inclusion of some aspects of the implementation criteria in stage one of stage two proposals is sensible.The drafting of a Consensus Report to provide a factual account of the discussions is a valuable resource and will no doubt serve to make the stage-two evaluations more accurate and effective.

IMI seeks to bring back the same group of experts for the stage two evaluations wherever possible. The observers felt that this was a very good approach and should help to ensure that the shortcomings are addressed prior to any funding being agreed.

Any other remarks

While it is impossible to know the number of proposals that will be received for any given call, it might be a good idea to try and recruit a few additional experts in reserve. The observers recognise that bringing in reserves may not be feasible as it could be problematic asking highly specialised experts to block off time in the event that they were not required. However, the observers felt that it could be worth exploring options to ensure workloads are more evenly split between moderators and experts.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the call topics, experts from a variety of backgrounds are invited to participate. This is a strength but does in some cases introduce a risk that one expert can influence the evaluations if they are deemed the only one with the specific knowledge on a particular issue (e.g. animal to human testing feasibility). 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 observers recognise that this may not be feasible.

With regard to how calls are defined, some experts felt that the process of getting buy-in from several big pharma partners can result in calls that are too prescriptive in some respects and too general in others. Indeed, while the documentation provided via the website describes the process of topic identification and refinements very well, some experts were still unclear as to how specific call topic texts were arrived at. There is an infographic explaining how IMI call topics are generated which is very informative. However, it is currently only visible in a pop-up box that cannot be expanded requiring the reader to scroll through the image to see the various stages making it difficult to get a full sense of the workflow. The observers suggest making this image more easily viewed in its entirety on the IMI website and suggest that it might also be included on the wall in evaluation rooms to serve as a visual reminder of the specific IMI co-creation model.

The evaluation participants praised IMI staff for always being visible, approachable and highly knowledgeable. 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 to the IT system for reimbursement. The working environment was very comfortable and effective for the onsite discussions. The continuous provision of coffee, teas and a range of snacks for experts was highly appreciated by all participants.

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.

- To provide a visual reminder of the co-creation call process in each evaluation room that experts can refer to if needed. In addition, it would also be helpful to optimise its visibility via the IMI website in full screen mode rather than as a scrollable image.

- Despite the independent observers being introduced during both briefing sessions, some experts were still unclear as to the relationship between the independent observers and IMI. In future it might be helpful to emphasise that independent observers are not IMI staff during the briefing(s).

- Investigate new functionality in SEP that will facilitate the sending and amending of CR text between moderators and the IMI actors on site to improve the security of the information contained within the CRs. However, the observers recognise that this will not be a quick fix.

- Wherever feasible, avoid remote participation by experts which depend upon technology working well. However, the observers realise that due to the very niche expertise required to evaluate the call proposals, this will not always be possible.

- Consider extending the amount of time that experts have to carry out remote evaluation of proposals for calls receiving very high submission rates.

- Consider making clearer how experts can provide remarks to be sent to the Ethics Panel for consideration.