

# IHI JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID:

HORIZON-JU-IHI-2025-10-two-  
stage (1<sup>st</sup> stage)

Date of evaluation: From 26<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> May 2025

Number of pages in this report (title page included): 11

Name of the observer: Maria Anna (Mariann) UNTERLUGGAUER

Present at the evaluation: From 26<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> May 2025

18/06/2025 Mariann UNTERLUGGAUER

# Table of contents

- 1. Introduction and approach taken by the observer ..... 3
- 2. Overall impression..... 4
- 3. Any other remarks ..... 7
- 4. Summary of Recommendations ..... 7

# 1. Introduction and approach taken by the observer

This report describes the assessment by an Independent Observer (I.O.) on the evaluation of call HORIZON-JU-IHI-2025-10-two stage: 'Stage 1 (hereafter Call 10 Stage 1).

The IHI Call 10 Stage 1 was launched and published on 16/01/2025 with a short proposal submission deadline on 23 April 2025. The full proposal submission deadline is scheduled on 14 October 2025. The call included three topics:

- Topic 1: Digital label: one source of comprehensive information for medical technology products
- Topic 2: Enabling and safeguarding innovation in secondary use of health data in the European Health Data Space (EHDS)
- Topic 3: Per- and Poly-fluoroalkyl substance (PFAS) exposure, emissions, and end of life management in the healthcare sector

Each topic was steered by an IHI Scientific Officer (i.e. moderator) with a back-up Scientific Officer, as support. The main task of the I.O. was to attend the central evaluation, to prepare an independent report and make a judgement on the whole evaluation process. To get familiar with the various topics, acronyms, and call specifics, the observer was appointed several months before the call deadline and attended a dedicated briefing with the IHI Call Coordinator. The central evaluation consisted of three main activities: a plenary briefing for the evaluators (on the first day of the central evaluation), consensus meetings, and a final plenary meeting to approve the ranking list. Prior to the central review, evaluators prepared Individual Evaluation Reports (IER), for the submitted proposal. During the consensus meetings, the I.O. attended all consensus meetings organised within the 3 different topics. The consensus meetings were held through WebEx and run in parallel (more information are provided under item 2 of this report). The software used for the entire evaluation was the SEP Evaluation Tool which supported the workflow at each step. To be able to judge the whole process, the approach taken was to stay in each of the provided virtual spaces as long as necessary, to understand how consensus was reached and conflicts, if any, were solved; also, to observe moderators' approach, and decisions taken in regard of fairness, consistency and equality.

The following criteria were taken into account to prepare the report:

- Specific call requirements met (according to the rules)
- Flow of discussion (efficiency)
- Equality at the table (all voices heard)
- Fairness within the group, and towards applicants
- Support provided by IHI staff (clarification, facts)

- Time management

## 2. Overall impression

### 2.1 Scale of complexity

The first stage of the consensus meetings for Call 10 took place remotely from Monday, 26 May to Wednesday, 28 May 2025. The call included three topics. In total 22 proposals were submitted, 7 were declared either inadmissible or ineligible, therefore they were not discussed during the central evaluation. Finally, 15 proposals were evaluated by external experts and the related consensus reports were written by a rapporteur, discussed, scored and approved by all experts. Under the two-stage evaluation procedure, and on the basis of the outcome of the first stage evaluation, the applicant consortium of the highest ranked short proposal for each topic will be invited to discuss with the relevant industry consortium the feasibility of jointly developing a full proposal, at the second stage.

The table below details of the number of proposals evaluated compared to the total number of proposals submitted.

Topic	Number of proposals	Outcome
Topic 1 (Digital Label)	7 proposals submitted, 4 evaluated (1 ineligible   2 inadmissible)	1 below threshold, 3 above
Topic 2 (Data Reuse)	9 proposals submitted, 7 evaluated (1 ineligible   1 inadmissible)	2 below threshold, 5 above
Topic 3 (PFAS)	6 proposals submitted, 4 proposals evaluated (2 ineligible)	1 below threshold, 4 above

For all topics, experts evaluated the proposals on the basis of criteria of ‘Excellence’, ‘Impact’ and ‘Quality and efficiency of the implementation’ in line with the Horizon Europe framework programme. Each criterion was scored out of 5. Half marks were given. For the evaluation of proposals under two-stage submission procedures:

- the threshold for individual criteria is 3
- the overall threshold, applying to the sum of the three individual scores, is 10
- proposals that pass individual thresholds and the overall threshold can be considered for funding, within the limits of the available budget

- Proposals that did not pass these thresholds were rejected.

## 2.2 Transparency of the procedure

The observer's web briefing for Call 10 stage 1 was held on 14 May 2025. This was organised by the IHI Call Coordinator providing all necessary elements to understand the evaluation process and the specificities of the IHI JU programme. Subsequently, the corresponding slides were provided to the I.O. Some questions, for further clarifications, were asked during the briefing and additional questions were answered, later in due time, without significant delay by the IHI call coordination team. The WebEx Link and access to SEP was provided timely, on May 21. In addition, detailed information about the list of all experts contracted and those invited for the consensus meetings, as well as the agenda for each call each day.

At the beginning of the consensus meeting, the evaluators were informed about their duties, the rules set out in Horizon Europe Framework programme, and the specific rules that apply for Call 10 Stage 1. In addition, a short introductory video, by the IHI Executive Director, was shown, which helped in setting the scene for the whole evaluation.

In particular, experts were made aware of the necessity to disclose any potential Conflict of Interest (COI). A preliminary COI check had been performed prior to the consensus meeting using the tool available in SEP and therefore a number of experts were excluded from the evaluation. Other experts declined to participate in this evaluation due to unforeseen circumstances.

## 2.3 Throughput time of the process and the efficiency of the procedures

Each proposal was evaluated independently by 4 or 6 experts depending on the topic. The discussions took place in a friendly atmosphere. All experts involved remained focused and fair, and therefore efficient. Opinions were exchanged during the process, which is a sign of openness and the ability to take different arguments into account. This process was made possible also by the professionalism of the moderators.

The structure of the panels was excellent. Each expert had the knowledge and competencies to fulfil the assigned task. In terms of gender balance, women were in the majority in the pool of experts evaluators.

Task	Panels	Time
Topic 1 (eLabeling)	2 IHI moderators (1 woman/ 1 man) 4 evaluators (2 women / 2 men)	Start: 26/05 finished at noon, 27/05
Topic 2 (Data Reuse)	2 IHI moderators (2 women) 4 evaluators (2 women / 2 men)	Start: 26/05 finished at noon, 28/05

Topic 3  
(PFAS)

2 IHI moderators (2 men)  
6 evaluators (4 women / 2 men)

Start: 26/05  
finished at noon, 27/05

Experts were assigned the tasks of writing an Individual Evaluation Report (IER), and some of them were also allocated to act as rapporteurs, preparing a draft Consensus Report (CR), one per evaluated proposal, prior to the central evaluation.

The challenge was related to the fact that an expert wrote first the individual report and later switched to a neutral tone in order to summarise all provided IERs properly.

Each rapporteur was invited to "set the scene" for the discussion by giving an overall impression of the proposal they had been allocated, based on the Individual Evaluation Reports provided.

The IHI Scientific Officers provided guidance and support during the finalisation of each consensus report. This increased efficiency and saved time, but also showed the high burden that every moderator has to cope with, ensuring the optimal flow of conversation, intervening when needed and ensuring that the relevant rules are followed, and consensus is reached.

In addition, to help master the whole evaluation, a back-up Scientific Officer was present during all consensus meetings, to sustain the necessary high level of concentration and helped with practical arrangements.

### **2.3 Efficiency, reliability, usability of the implementation, including the IT-tools**

An annotated evaluation form was provided to the experts, which was very helpful and increased efficiency. This was shared at the beginning of the evaluation to guide all experts through the whole process.

The software WebEx was used for all remote consensus meetings. Due to poor connectivity some cameras had to be turned off from time to time. This didn't impact the process at all. While everyone was able to handle the tool, some found it difficult to increase the font size of the shared report, which made it difficult to read. A hint in advance can be helpful, as this seems to be a common problem in remote meetings.

SEP was only partially used to produce the consensus report in real-time. Instead, writing and scoring were carried out in MS Word. Because it is more convenient. The text was later copied into SEP, in order for the experts to give their final agreement.

### **2.4 Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality**

Fairness and impartiality were maintained during every step of the scientific evaluation. In addition, the process was carried out according to the proposed rules (i.e. IHI guidelines, Horizon Europe Grants Manual).

The most important information about confidentiality was shown at the beginning of the consensus meeting in the above-mentioned video: "As an expert evaluating a proposal,

you may not be (or become) involved in any of the actions/projects resulting from the evaluated proposals (at any stage of the procedure)."

### **3. Any other remarks**

The collaboration between the IHI moderator and experts was very effective since roles and leadership were clearly defined at the onset of the evaluation. Maintaining a smooth and productive discussion required striking the right balance between politeness and formality. The experts received clear instructions and precise advice, this was very much appreciated, for all topics, but especially for topic 3. In addition, this showed a very well-structured process.

The annotated evaluation form was highly appreciated by the experts as it contains all the information necessary for the preparation of IERs and CRs. In addition, it was proposed to further develop this form for other evaluations, especially to assess whether a consortium has the necessary expertise to perform the task and whether, in addition, the necessary infrastructure can be provided. This information is usually distributed throughout the proposal (Part A and Part B). Therefore, more guidance on this could be prepared, for example a summary could help experts to assess this aspect of proposals.

Although, this is not a specific observation regarding this call, but rather concerns other Horizon Europe calls, it was still worth mentioning it.

### **4. Summary of Recommendations**

It is suggested to make use of the commitment of the experts in relation to the agenda of the evaluation. The availability of experts was originally requested for three days. Depending on the number of proposals submitted, the actual consensus phase was shortened. This can be communicated to experts in advance, wherever possible.

Allocating adequate time for breaks – both to develop new ideas and to reflect on existing arguments – should not be viewed as unproductive, but rather as an essential component of an efficient and thoughtful process.

IHI itself takes the requirement of gender balance seriously. Proof was provided by the set-up of the panels by the moderators. The distribution of experts across the proposals in terms of gender, geographic location and sector was good, with a multidisciplinary balance of expertise.

Despite its importance, the discussion around how applicants meet the women's participation in research and innovation projects, is often addressed superficially. To effectively tackle the persistent imbalance still present in academia and industry, it is suggested enforcing a more rigorous and meaningful evaluation of this criterion, ensuring it is treated with the seriousness it deserves.