

IHI JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: HORIZON-JU-IHI-
2026-12-single-stage

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Present at the evaluation: From 8 to 19 June 2026



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1 Introduction and approach taken by the observer

This report describes the Independent Observer's (IO) observations, assessment and advice on the practical workings of the evaluation process, for the HORIZON-JU-IHI-2026-12-single-stage call (i.e. Call 12), on the conduct and fairness of the evaluation sessions, on the application of the award criteria and on the procedures and their implementation, including IT tools, and opportunities for improvement of the evaluation process.

In execution of his task the observer took the following approach:

The observer received and reviewed information ahead of the central meetings, including previous Independent Observer's report from Call 9 (single stage), a list of Evaluators, the Call 12 Call Text, and the IHI 2026 Work Programme, had a briefing with the Call Coordinator, and was given access to the SEP evaluation platform and preliminary meeting agendas.

The consensus and panel meetings for the five Topics, including briefing by the IHI Executive Director, Evaluators' briefing and introductions, discussion of proposals, scoring, drafting and quality control of Consensus Reports (CR), Cross-reading and Panel Ranking, were held fully remotely via WebEx (with Links provided to the observer), as follows:

Date	Topic	Topic Title
8-11 June	Topic 1	Boosting innovation for a better understanding of the determinants of health
15-19 June	Topic 2	Boosting innovation through better integration of fragmented health R&I efforts
15-19 June	Topic 3	Boosting innovation for people centred integrated healthcare solutions
8-12 June	Topic 4	Boosting innovation through exploitation of digitalisation and data exchange in healthcare
15-16 June	Topic 5	Boosting innovation for better assessment of the added value of innovative integrated healthcare solutions

During the consensus meetings that took place fully remotely by Webex, the observer attended all days of the evaluations, including the panel briefing and proposal review meetings. As meetings for topics 1 and 4 (Week 1), and for topics 2, 3 and 5 (Week 2) ran in parallel, the observer rotated between the meetings with the aim of observing as much of the process across the topics as possible. By the end of the evaluation phase, the observer was able to fully attend three (3) panel briefings, seventeen (17) consensus reviews, seven (7) QC checks, twenty-three (23) combined QC /cross-readings, seven (7) cross-readings, and five (5) panel rankings to evaluate their quality and compliance with the standard format.

All expert evaluators (referred to in this report as 'evaluators') received the email address of the Independent Observer (IO) and were encouraged to provide comments/feedback both during and after the evaluation process. Additionally, the email address of the IO was regularly posted in the WebEx Chat by the moderator or the IO themselves. At the time of writing this report, the observer had received email feedback from three (3) evaluators, as well as discussion feedback from

evaluation panels following each panel ranking. On several occasions the observer was given the opportunity to introduce themselves, with a reciprocal 'Tour de Table' introduction from the evaluators, and/or at the conclusion of consensus discussions to gather round-table feedback from the remaining evaluators.

2 Overall impression

- **Scale of complexity of the evaluation task:**

A total of forty-eight (48) eligible proposals, across five (5) topics, were evaluated by seventy-one (71) evaluators. *Note: Seventy-three (73) evaluators were contracted, however two (2) declined their participation.* Originally, fifty-six (56) proposals were submitted, of which six (6) were declared ineligible, two (2) inadmissible. One (1) initially submitted by mistake under topic 2 was moved to topic 3.

Topic #	Eligible proposals (total submitted)
1	11 (12)
2	18 (19)
3	7 (12)
4	10 (11)
5	2
Total	48 (56)

Overall, the observer found the evaluation workload to be well balanced, albeit in the upper range of complexity compared to standard Horizon Europe RIA proposals. The present call had some specific requirements and a few extra annexes that demanded extra attention from the evaluators, including:

- In-kind contribution and types of participants, necessitating careful examination not only the financial contributions but also the nature and value of the in-kind contributions provided by the members of the industry associations.
- Annex to the Budget table, requiring meticulous scrutiny, especially ensuring that at least 45% of the sum of total project eligible costs plus costs of any related In-kind contributions to additional activities is provided by IHI JU private members and IHI JU Contributing Partners, their constituent entities and affiliated entities.
- Increased page limit of 50 pages, compared to the standard 45 pages for Horizon Europe RIA proposals, which meant that there was more content to review.

As with the previous Call 9, the scope of this Call 12 was especially broad, to encourage applicant-led approaches, structured around strategic objectives and driving innovation; it looks for ambitious & transformative proposals.

Based upon recommendations from Call 9, this Call 12 saw an increased use of sub-panels and breakout sessions, which significantly improved the time management of the process. Most evaluators again found this broader scope to be enriching, with evaluators positively noting the increased quality of proposals compared to Call 9.

- **Transparency of the procedures:**

The execution of all consensus and ranking procedures was clear and transparent. At the beginning of the evaluation, the evaluators were informed on the procedures, the evaluation process, the scoring principles and its meaning and the IT tools to be used, i.e. SEP and WebEx. The procedures were clearly stated in the documentation, reiterated during the briefing sessions and when needed, panel moderators clarified the scoring system to the evaluators.

Each panel commenced its work with a briefing and explanations by the moderator (SO). Additionally, a briefing by the IHI Executive Director was presented for each panel (live, or a recording). All the moderators were coherent and explained the procedures in a transparent manner. The need to treat proposals equally and in a consistent manner was reminded several times during the meetings. Clarifications were also provided to the evaluators with regards to the definition of weakness, shortcoming and minor shortcoming.

The moderators efficiently facilitated the consensus review process within their panels, maintained impartiality and urged evaluators to participate actively during the discussions, by providing their assessment/view, and ensuring equal treatments for all proposals. Throughout the discussion, evaluators were encouraged to identify the proposal's strengths, weaknesses, and shortcomings and ensure that the scores reflect the assessment for each evaluation criterion. Feedback from the quality control (IHI JU staff) was discussed by the evaluators and it was taken into consideration accordingly. Ultimately, the evaluators reached consensus on the scores per proposal and also on the ranking lists.

Evaluators were frequently made aware of the necessity to disclose any potential Conflict of Interest (COI) in order to take necessary measures, during evaluation and throughout the consensus and cross-reading tasks and meetings. The absence of COI was ensured through specific clauses in each individual's contract. In addition, preliminary COI check were performed using the tool available in SEP.

Including the presence of an IO, with the freedom to raise any questions to the evaluation staff (evaluators, moderators and the call coordinator), is a further indication of the commitment to full transparency in the evaluation exercise. All questions the observer raised were promptly and clearly answered without any restrictions. For transparency and openness, evaluators were also informed that they could raise any concerns with the observer if they wished.

- **Throughput time of the process and the efficiency of the procedures**

The overall evaluation process spanned from 29 April to 19 June 2026, with the period from 29 Apr 2026 to 26 May 2026 dedicated to individual remote evaluation and IER preparation, and the period from 26 May 2026 to 05 June 2026 for draft Consensus Report preparation. The consensus

and panel meetings phase took place across two (2) weeks from 8 to 19 June 2026. This timeframe was sufficient to cover all phases of the evaluation process, including IER preparation, CR drafting, consensus meetings, quality of CR by the IHI legal officers and panel review cross-check and ranking meetings for the 48 eligible proposals being evaluated, allowing evaluators to complete their work efficiently.

Each proposal was evaluated by four to five (4-5) independent expert evaluators, with each evaluator assigned between 2 and 6 proposals to review during the individual evaluation phase, which lasted nearly 4 weeks.

Overall, the efficiency of the procedures was well maintained, ensuring a thorough and fair evaluation process. All consensus meetings were completed within or ahead of the assigned daily schedules, indicating that the throughput time was well planned and adequate. The workload on all moderators was high, as they had to start their work before and continue after each day's meetings, despite which the moderation proved to be highly effective.

The use of sub-panels and breakout sessions was significantly increased for this Call 12, based on recommendations from Call 9, and this was found to significantly streamline the throughput time and the overall efficiency of the evaluation process. Additional cross-reading meetings took place, to ensure transparency and consistency of scoring, qualifiers and consensus comments; evaluators from one sub-panel within the respective topic, reviewed the top CRs scoring 'above threshold' from the other sub-panel.

Overall, the workload and the provided time for the Quality Control (QC), by IHI staff, of the CRs appeared to be appropriate, as indicated by the limited number of suggested changes. However, a few proposals at the end of week 2 required more extensive discussion and edits to CR comments and qualifiers, which would normally be expected to be flagged earlier during the QC process. In the observer's opinion, transparency and fairness was maintained throughout, and all the original evaluators participated in these discussions to make timely corrections.

- **Efficiency, reliability and usability of the implementation of the procedures, including the IT-tools:**

The observer noted a thoughtful and balanced selection of evaluators, and this was reaffirmed from evaluator's feedback to the observer, which described a very good balance of expertise, bringing a diversity of perspectives that added real value and created a collaborative atmosphere where input was genuinely heard and considered.

Materials provided to evaluators in advance were clear, well-structured and gave enough time for evaluators to prepare. This contributed significantly to effective consensus discussions.

Overall, the remote consensus review process was extremely well organised. In the discussion meetings, the pace was solid, the coordination smooth, and there was room for meaningful exchange. Moderators provided frequent visual reference to resources such as the interpretation of the scores and practical guidance to describe strengths or negative points in the proposals and use of appropriate qualifiers.

All meetings were fully remote using the Webex tool. Webex was familiar to all participants and functioned without any significant technical issues. Occasionally, there were connection problems on the participant's end, but these did not adversely impact the evaluation process. Most participants turned off their microphones, while mostly keeping their cameras on, when they were not speaking, to maintain the quality of the exchanges. A small number of evaluators expressed

difficulties in changing between rooms and breakout sessions, or difficulties in aligning the agenda with start times for some Webex meetings, but for the most part this was very well managed given the inherent complexity and number of evaluators.

Overall, I believe the procedures, including the IT tools used in the present IHI evaluation, were reliable and robust. The implementation of these procedures was efficient and effective, contributing to a very smooth evaluation process.

- **Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality:**

The observer is fully convinced that the evaluation process was fully compliant with the principles of independence, impartiality, objectivity, accuracy and consistency, fair and conducted in full compliance with all general Horizon Europe rules while also considering the specificities of the IHI Call 12.

Procedures were put in place to ensure an impartial, fair, transparent and confidential evaluation. Each group of evaluators was briefed by the responsible SO on the first morning of their evaluation. The guiding principles of independence, impartiality, objectivity, accuracy, and consistency were reiterated several times during the evaluation. Additionally, a briefing by the IHI Executive Director was presented for each panel. The procedures were highlighted including confidentiality and conflicts of interest.

The early detection and treatment of potential conflicts of interest were key to achieving impartial and fair evaluations. All evaluators, along with the observer, signed a declaration of the absence of COI as part of their contracts. The importance of avoiding COI was also reiterated to evaluators during briefings. Conflicts of interest are generally detected before the start of the evaluation but could also be uncovered during the evaluation.

The involvement of multiple panel members in the evaluation process for each proposal, with well-defined roles 4 or 5 evaluators, 1 IO, and 2 or 3 moderators (main and back-ups), significantly contributed to achieving impartial and fair evaluations.

- **Conformity of the evaluation process witnessed with the evaluation procedures published in the HE Grants Manual:**

The evaluation process closely adhered to the rules and criteria specified in the Horizon Europe Grants Manual for assessing project proposals, including rigorous evaluation based on specific criteria of each section i.e. excellence, impact and quality and efficiency of the implementation.

A notable aspect of the process was the commitment of all moderators to ensuring that evaluators assessed each proposal section independently and objectively, without veering into broad interpretations, extrapolations or providing recommendations. This approach maintained with good consistency and fairness across all evaluations.

In addition to these general procedures, the IHI JU evaluation team provided comprehensive briefing materials to the evaluators which offered detailed context and content specific to the call and its topics, ensuring that evaluators had a clear understanding of what was expected to be delivered.

- **Quality of the EU evaluation process in comparison with the evaluation procedures of national and/or other international research funding schemes:**

The whole evaluation process was of very high quality by comparison to equivalent national and international evaluation procedures, to which the observer has been party. Evaluators commended many aspects of the consensus-building approach, the involvement of multidisciplinary panels with high expertise, as well as the interactions among the fellow evaluators and moderators. Through the ongoing evaluations, evaluators gained valuable insights, and through the exchange of diverse expertise, they were able to appropriately refine their assessment based on fellow reviewers' input, all aimed at achieving consensus.

Most especially, evaluators recognised the effort, professionalism, support and engagement brought by the IHI JU staff, and especially the SOs and moderators.

- **Quality of the evaluation process overall:**

The evaluation was successfully completed on time with the overall quality of the evaluation found to be high and very professional. 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. Careful consideration was given to each evaluator's questions and expressed opinions. The IHI staff has 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

- **Quality of the documentation provided to evaluators beforehand:**

All evaluators and the observer had access to the relevant documents needed to conduct a high quality evaluation process, which were provided during multiple different specific briefings along with the usual documents that applicants had been using to prepare their proposals, available on the "Funding and Tender portal" (such as the IHI work programme and the relevant annexes, the IHI application forms, the evaluation forms, usable for both IERs and CRs).

The observer found the quality of the documentation provided to be of very high quality, and this was echoed from evaluator feedback received.

- **Quality of the remote briefing sessions:**

The observer received their briefing on 22 April 2026. Every consensus panel commenced its work with a briefing and explanations by the moderator. These high-quality and comprehensive briefings covered the relevant topics thoroughly, while providing evaluators and the observer the opportunity to ask any remaining questions before starting the consensus phase, feedback from evaluators was broadly complimentary of the quality of the briefing sessions.

- **The understanding by evaluators of the call (context, topics), of the evaluation process and their role and of the award criteria and scoring scheme:**

Overall, the evaluators demonstrated a solid understanding of their roles, the evaluation criteria, and the importance of maintaining fairness and consistency throughout the evaluation process and were well-informed about the call and the specific topics they were evaluating. They understood the significance of their role in determining the funding decisions for the proposed projects. The instruction to evaluate the proposals as written and to refrain from recommending substantial changes or improvements was clearly comprehended by the evaluators. Evaluators also demonstrated a good understanding of the award criteria and scoring scheme, and moderators did a good job in promptly addressing and clarifying any concerns arising, including through reference to the scoring scheme through on-screen sharing. Throughout my observation, moderators consistently referenced the scoring scheme before finalizing the consensus and awarding scores, which enhanced the integrity of the evaluation process.

Other important aspects well understood by evaluators included the requirement to provide comments before assigning scores, avoiding double penalization or reward for the same reason under different criteria, emphasizing the quality of the consensus report for clear feedback to applicants and to prevent potential disputes, and maintaining consistency between comments and scores.

- **The allocation of evaluators to proposals: balance (gender, geographic, affiliation):**

For the evaluation of the forty-eight (48) eligible proposals in this call, seventy-one (71) evaluators were invited; selected based primarily on their evaluatorise and coverage of the various facets of the call. Efforts were made to maintain a balanced gender representation, geographic diversity and diversity in the types of organizations represented. *Note: Due to last minute re-arrangement in the evaluation schedule, two experts who had participated in the evaluation of the first week were contacted to provide support to topic 2 in the second week, which they accepted.*

- Gender Balance: 42% of the evaluators were women, indicating a significant effort towards gender balance in the evaluation panel.
- Evaluatorise and Experience: Among the evaluators, 19% were evaluators not contracted in the previous 3 years, of which 17% were never contracted. This mix ensured a blend of experienced evaluators and fresh perspectives.
- Geographical Coverage: Evaluators were recruited from 26 different EU countries, as well as from Associated Countries (United Kingdom) and Third Countries (United States, Canada and Switzerland) aiming to provide diverse perspectives and ensure regional representation.
- Sector Representation: Among the evaluators, 18% came from private for-profit organizations, highlighting the involvement of industry perspectives. The remaining evaluators were from higher or secondary education organizations, research institutions, or other public bodies such as hospitals or government-funded agencies.

Overall, the allocation of evaluators aimed to ensure a comprehensive evaluation process that considered the broad spectrum of evaluatorise needed for the diverse criteria and sub-criteria of the call.

- **The process of the individual evaluations and the actors involved:**

The individual evaluation process was conducted from 29 Apr 2026 to 5 June 2026 in a fully remote manner with no interaction between the observer and the evaluators. Therefore, the quality of the process and the evaluators involved can only be judged by the review of IER. The observer reviewed a few randomly selected IERs and found all of them to be of good quality. Another opportunity to assess the evaluators was during the consensus meeting, where overall, all evaluators demonstrated high competence in their respective fields and maintained a professional conduct.

- **The process of the consensus meetings and the actors involved:**

The observer attended the consensus meetings scheduled from 8 to 19 June 2026 for the evaluation of Horizon Europe projects under the IHI Call 12. All consensus phase meetings were completed within or ahead of the assigned daily schedules, indicating that the throughput time was well planned and adequate. Moderators played a crucial role by providing necessary clarifications and fostering an inclusive environment where evaluators felt comfortable raising concerns.

- **Criteria and scoring scheme: appropriateness, completeness, relevance, clarity, consistency in application:**

The three main criteria and their sub-criteria applicable to the evaluation process were thoroughly explained to all evaluators, who demonstrated a strong understanding of these criteria. Additionally, all evaluators were well-versed in the scoring system and understood the significance of score thresholds. Throughout the evaluation, the score interpretation table served as a useful reference to ensure consistency and clarity in scoring against agreed-upon comments for each criterion.

Overall, the criteria and scoring scheme were appropriately understood and/or clarified during the remote meetings and consistently applied by evaluators during the consensus review phase, highlighting the effectiveness of the moderators in ensuring fairness and accuracy in the evaluation process.

- **The process of the final panel meeting and the actors involved:**

The final panel (ranking) meetings, which culminated in the preparation of the final ranking lists for each topic, were conducted efficiently and smoothly. Where proposals had equal scores, an ex-aequo process was taken to rank these. This was done in accordance to the Horizon Europe rules for ex-aequo and the additional information highlighted in the IHI Annual Work Programme 2026.

Evaluators questioned certain aspects of the rules for ex-aequo (proposals with the same score within a single budget envelope), notably the rule to differentiate based on 'the highest number of IHI JU private members and constituent and affiliated entities of the IHI JU private members' for ESRs with identical scores for each of the three sub-criterion. It was reminded that these rules are in accordance with the General Annexes of Horizon Europe and complemented by specific requirements included in the call document for Call 12, which reflects the private public nature of

IHI . In this particular instance, the impacted ESRs did not represent proposals with potential for funding. However, evaluators suggested whether (had they been for proposals with potential for funding) there could be room for a final expert discussion before applying the tie-break criteria mechanically.

Before finalizing the ranking list, all evaluators formally expressed their agreement with the consensus reports and the final ranking list, thereby endorsing the evaluation results. This consensus ensured that the evaluation process concluded with a unified decision supported by all participating evaluators.

Overall, the final panel meeting served as a critical step in solidifying the evaluation outcomes, marking the conclusion of a thorough and well-coordinated evaluation process.

- **The process of the hearings (if any) and the actors involved:**

N.A.

- **The occurrence and handling of specific issues (if any) such as conflicts of interest:**

N.A.

- **The quality of evaluation summary reports:**

The importance of providing high-quality ESRs was clearly emphasized to all evaluators, considering that these reports represent the sole feedback received by applicants after extensive effort and dedication. Throughout the evaluation process, all involved parties diligently adhered to this directive. The observers' independent review of randomly selected ESRs confirmed that they consistently delivered fair, clear, and valuable feedback to the applicants. Constructive comments were present where warranted, aiming to guide applicants in refining their future proposals.

The presence of constructive feedback is particularly beneficial as it encourages applicants to enhance their submissions for future opportunities. This approach not only supports the continuous improvement of proposal quality but also reflects the commitment to fostering a supportive and developmental environment within the evaluation process.

Overall, the quality of the ESRs underscored the dedication to providing meaningful feedback, thereby contributing to the enhancement of future applications and the overall effectiveness of the evaluation process.

- **Overall conduct of staff: responsiveness, hospitality, competence etc:**

Through all phases of the evaluation process, the observer was consistently impressed by the professionalism and support demonstrated by all IHI JU staff involved in the evaluation. Their high degree of responsiveness and competence significantly contributed to the smooth operation of the evaluation.

All questions, whether from evaluators or the IO, were addressed promptly and efficiently. This responsiveness ensured that any queries or concerns were resolved in a timely manner, thereby facilitating the continuity and efficiency of the evaluation process.

- **Infrastructure and working conditions for evaluators:**

The complete evaluation process, including both the individual assessment and consensus phases, was conducted remotely. All evaluators and moderators appeared to have reasonably effective access to good working conditions and the necessary infrastructure to perform their roles effectively, and process was conducted without significant technical or logistical hindrances.

- **Workload and time given to evaluators for their work, (remotely and/or on-site, as applicable):**

While demanding, the overall time allocated the complete evaluation process (individual and consensus) was adequate.

- **Remuneration of evaluators (in relation to workload):**

N.A.

4 Summary of Recommendations

After observing the complete evaluation process and gathering feedback from evaluators, the observer has identified a small number of recommendations for consideration by IHI in future evaluations:

Recommendations specific to Quality Control:

Currently, the QC of the CRs is carried out by IHI staff and legal officers. While overall, the workload and the provided time for of the CRs appeared to be appropriate, as indicated by the limited number of suggested changes, a few proposals required more extensive discussion and edits during the cross-readings, which would normally be expected to be flagged earlier during a QC process. The nature of the Call Topic, number of Proposals and the new addition of sub-panels and associated cross-reading, mean that IHI staff have a very high workload across the two weeks. It may be worth considering engaging external independent experts to support the QC process, as is typical in a number of other Horizon Europe Call's.