

IHI JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: HORIZON-JU-IHI-
2023-05-single-stage

Date of evaluation: 20/02/2024 to 23/02/2024

Number of pages in this report (title page included): 7

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Present at the evaluation: 20/02/2024 to 23/02/2024



25/03/2024

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1 Introduction and approach taken by the observer

This report describes the Independent Observer’s assessment on the practical implementation of the HORIZON-JU-IHI-2023-05-single-stage call, 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.

In execution of her task, the observer took the following approach:

The observer received information ahead of the central meetings, had a briefing with the Call Coordinator, and was given access to the documentation related to the call in the SEP evaluation platform. The consensus meetings were held fully remotely via WebEx and divided into three parts, as follows:

Date	Topic Name	Meeting
21 Feb 2024	Topic 1	Remote consensus and panel meeting
20-21 Feb 2024	Topic 2 and Topic 3	Remote consensus and panel meeting
22-23 Feb 2024	Topic 4	Remote consensus and panel meeting

During the consensus meetings that took place remotely, the observer attended all days of the evaluations, including the panel briefing and proposal review meetings and had the opportunity to discuss with the IHI scientific officers/moderators and experts, aspects related to the evaluation process. All experts received the email address of the Independent Observer and were encouraged to provide comments/feedback both during and after the evaluation process. The present report duly addresses all comments provided by the experts.

2 Overall impression

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

This report describes the observations and assessments of the observer with regards to the evaluations of the below mentioned topics, as follow:

- Publication Date: **27.07.2023**
- Submission Deadline: **16.01.2024**
- Number of proposals submitted: **17**
- Number of ineligible proposals: **5**
- Total number of proposals evaluated: **12**
- Total number of experts involved in the evaluation were: **26**

According to the call requirements, applicants must ensure 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. If the 45% Industry contribution is not secured collectively by the industry consortium participants, the proposal is declared ineligible and therefore is not evaluated.

This eligibility criterion was not met by 5 proposals, and they were not evaluated. Thus, out of 17 received proposals, 12 proposals were considered admissible and eligible, therefore evaluated and discussed. Proposals were scored using the evaluation criteria (excellence, impact, quality

and efficiency of the implementation) as specified within the IHI JU Work Programme. The number of proposals to be funded per topic is listed below:

Topic		Proposals				
Topic	Topic title	Topic budget	Eligible (and evaluated)	ABOVE threshold	MAIN list	RESERVE list
1	Accelerating the implementation of New Approach Methodologies and other innovative non-animal approaches for the development, testing and production of health technologies	30 M€	1	1	1	0
2	Development and proof of principle of new clinical applications of theranostics solutions	25 M€	4	3	3	0
3	Improved prediction, detection, and treatment approaches for comprehensive stroke management	40 M€	2	1	1	0
4	Maximising the potential of synthetic data generation in healthcare applications	20 M€	5	2	2	0
TOTAL		115 M€	12	7	7	0

- **Transparency of the procedures:**

Overall, in all topics the execution of all consensus and ranking procedures were clear and transparent. At the beginning of the evaluation, the experts were duly informed on the procedures, the evaluation process, the scoring principles and its meaning and the IT tools to be used - SEP for evaluation, and WebEx - for the consensus phase. The procedures were clearly stated in the documentation, reiterated during the briefing sessions and when needed, panel moderators clarified the scoring system to the experts. Every panel commenced its work with a briefing and explanations by the moderator. A briefing by the Head of Scientific Operations was presented for each panel. 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 experts with regards to the definition of weakness, shortcoming and minor shortcoming.

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

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

The time of the whole process starting from the submission closure and the remote evaluation was rather tight (22/01/24 – 15/02/24) but this was communicated to the experts from the beginning of the process. The IERs were submitted by the experts in SEP on time. The consensus meetings ran smoothly and lasted 4 days covering the topics 1 to 4. The evaluation time dedicated in each panel varied between the topics depending on the number and the quality of the proposals, the length of the discussions required to reach consensus, but all evaluations were

completed on time. The meetings started at 9.00-10.00 am and ended well around 18:00. The panel moderators and the call coordinator monitored closely the panel advancements to ensure timely completion of all consensus reports and ranking lists. Consensus was achieved after careful consideration of the consensus report by the experts with the assistance of the panel moderator and the quality controller.

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

All meetings were held through the WebEx tool. The overall quality of connectivity to the WebEx was very good. All experts were familiar with the IT tools. For each proposal an evaluator acting also as a rapporteur was assigned. The CRs were finalised based on the draft text provided by the rapporteur. Generally, the technology allowed extended discussions. The Webex chat function was used effectively for messages and for short text editing. The CRs were submitted and approved in SEP. The proposal ranking was performed for each topic by the call coordinator with the presence of the experts who approved it in SEP. A panel review report was drafted at the end of each evaluation approved by all panel members.

- **Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality:**

All procedures were put in place to ensure an impartial, fair, transparent and confidential evaluation. Each group of experts was briefed by the responsible IHI scientific officer on the first morning of their evaluation. The guiding principles of independence, impartiality, objectivity, accuracy, and consistency were reiterated several times during the evaluation. An introductory video delivered by the IHI Head of Scientific Operations, was also presented in each panel prior to the start of the evaluation. The procedures were highlighted including confidentiality and conflicts of interest. Experts were asked to declare any potential conflict of interest at any time of the entire evaluation and to ensure confidentiality of all information.

At the start of the individual evaluation process, experts were asked to check for Conflict of Interest (Col). All Col cases reported by the experts, the moderator assessed the Col situation with the legal team in accordance with the HE rules and a final decision was taken depending on the type of Col: (i) exclusion from the entire evaluation; (ii) participation in the individual remote evaluation (without assessing the conflicted proposal) but not in the consensus meeting; or (iii) participation in the entire evaluation process including consensus meeting (without assessing the conflicted proposal and without participating in its discussion). There was no Col case reported during the consensus meetings phase.

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

The evaluation process followed the procedures published in the HE Grants Manual as they are reproduced for the procedures for experts for IHI calls capturing the specificities of the IHI programme.

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

The evaluation process was of high quality when compared to similar national and other international evaluation procedures. Experts commended the consensus-building approach, the involvement of multidisciplinary panels with high expertise, as well as the interactions among the fellow experts and moderators. Through the ongoing evaluations, experts 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.

- **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 expert'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 experts beforehand was useful.
- Quality of the on-site briefing sessions was high, comprehensive and helpful.
- Experts had a good understanding of their role, the topic (context, scope), the evaluation process and the scoring scheme.
- 26 experts participated during this call and 54% were women. External experts were chosen based on their skills, experience, and knowledge relevant to the call's topics. Emphasis was placed on achieving a well-rounded panel composition, considering factors such as skills, experience, knowledge, geographical diversity, gender balance, and the balance between the private and public sectors and regular rotation.
- The allocation of experts to proposals in terms of gender, geographic, expertise, relevance, previous experience was exceptionally well executed. The IHI staff has spent considerable time in selecting, recruiting, and supporting the experts in their evaluation tasks (individual and consensus phase). In each topic at least 5 experts were involved with a maximum of 8 in topic 3. All IHI staff were polite, helpful and informative towards the experts and the observer.
- An important level of respect was shown by all experts of others' opinions and views. The moderators were excellent, and they helped the panels in staying focused in the call text, answering questions and guiding the discussions while at the same time letting the experts discuss freely.
- The criteria and scoring scheme ensured a fair assessment of the proposals. The moderators during the online consensus meetings encouraged experts to justify their scores and openly discuss their reasoning.
- The process of the final panel meeting and the actors involved was well organised. The independent observer could not be present in all meetings duration especially when meetings of different topics ran in parallel.
- The quality of the evaluation summary reports was high, as particular attention was paid to this.
- The moderators were mindful of involving all the experts in the discussions. Still, in the different topics it happened that some experts were more active than others. The moderators were very skillful regarding the online running of the evaluations. They followed the same standards in

the different topics. They allowed plenty of time in consensus discussions for the experts to align their views and to achieve consistency. At the end of the evaluation the moderators showed the evaluation summary report and the ranking of the proposals. Finally, they asked the panel members to agree and approve the panel review report. The responsiveness and professionalism of the IHI Scientific Officers is acknowledged.

- Generally, the schedule was well balanced starting from 9:00 – 10.00a.m. and finishing at 6:00 p.m. with a lunch break and some coffee breaks. Occasionally, it was necessary to postpone and shorten the breaks in order to complete certain parts of the evaluation and text editing.
- Generally, the experts managed well the workload and the time given for the remote phase and consensus meetings. The experts had freedom and time to speak and discuss the weaknesses and strengths of proposals. They were open to hear opinions from different disciplines and eager to reach consensus. They were satisfied by the evaluation process and found it as a very good experience. Experts found the guidelines and the structure for the evaluation template provided very useful and appreciated the time allocated to get aligned with all key points of the topic and aspects needed for the discussions. Some experts participated in the IHI evaluation for the first time and found the process challenging although they appreciated the guidelines and details given in the briefings. In addition, it was suggested by some experts to consider sharing the draft prepared by the rapporteurs ahead of the consensus meetings so that they could be prepared for the points of discussion.
- There was no comment from experts on the remuneration.

4 Summary of Recommendations

The HORIZON-JU-IHI-2023-05-single-stage consensus evaluation process is considered successful, transparent, fair and at the highest standard possible based on the HE rules, and no specific recommendations are needed. The observer would like to congratulate the call coordinator, moderators and IHI staff for their keen and open approach, and their hard work for the successful execution of this complex task.