

IHI JU INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

Call ID: HORIZON-JU-IHI-2024-06-
two-stage (2nd stage)

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Present at the evaluation: 5 November 2024

Table of Contents

1	Introduction and approach taken by the observer	3
2	Overall impression.....	3
3	Any other remarks	6
4	Summary of Recommendations.....	7

1 Introduction and approach taken by the observer

The role of the Independent Observer (I.O.) was to follow, observe and report on the practical workings of the evaluation process, on the conduct and fairness of the evaluation sessions, on the application of the award criteria and on the procedures and their implementation, including the use of IT tools. Based on his observations the observer gives independent advice for improvement of the evaluation process.

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

The consensus meetings of Topics 1 and 2 were held fully remotely via WebEx on 5 November 2024 as follows:

Date	Topic Name	Meeting
5 November 2024	Topic 1 (1 proposal)	Remote consensus and panel meeting
	Topic 2 (1 proposal)	Remote consensus and panel meeting

The observer attended the day of the evaluation, for both topics, including the panel briefing and the 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 observer and were encouraged to provide comments/feedback both during and after the evaluation process.

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 submitted during the second stage of the concerned call, as follow:

Topic	Topic title	No of proposals
HORIZON-JU-IHI-2024-06-01	Support healthcare system resilience through a focus on persistency in the treatment of chronic diseases	1
HORIZON-JU-IHI-2024-06-02	Development of evidence based practical guidance for sponsors on the use of real-world data / real-world evidence	1

- **General Observation**

The above-mentioned call is the second stage of the evaluation for HORIZON-JU-IHI-2024-06 where applicants of the pre-identified industry consortium were merged with the successful applicants of stage 1, to prepare full proposals. In this respect two proposals, one per topic were submitted, according to the rules and procedures of IHI JU two stage call. Call Deadline was on 10 October 2024.

Proposals were scored using the evaluation criteria (excellence, impact, quality and efficiency of the implementation) as specified within the IHI JU Work Programme.

Before the remote consensus and panel meeting, the observer participated in a briefing organised by the IHI JU Call Coordinator. The aim of the briefing was to illustrate the specificity of the IHI calls (two-stage) as public-private partnership and to present role and responsibilities of the observer. After the briefing, the observer received supporting documents that he reviewed before the remote consensus.

Remote consensus meetings were held on November 5th, 2024. As meetings for both topics ran in parallel, the observers rotated between the meetings with the aim of following the moderation for both submitted proposals.

Throughout the evaluation period the observer had several exchanges with the moderator asking questions and seeking clarifications. Prompt answers were given, for example, based on the previous discussions and iterations within the group of evaluators what would be the most challenging part of the discussion and if there exists any discrepancy of the evaluators opinions which would be subject to more detailed discussion, or, if there is any scheduled topic for the discussion which could not have been discussed before the actual remote session (e.g. due to lack of information or absence of some supporting evidence etc.). Indeed, these moments would be of the observer's priority to witness.

The agenda of the Consensus Meetings were very well prepared for both panels; it followed a logical structure and helped them keep the timing for discussion for each proposal and within each evaluation criterion.

- **Transparency of the procedures**

The evaluation procedures were clearly communicated to all the participants, through dedicated briefings, including expert evaluators, and the observer. All actors had access to publicly available information, primarily found on the EU Funding and Tender opportunities portal and the IHI JU website.

In addition, each actor within this evaluation had received necessary supporting materials in a timely manner for the evaluation. These included general information about the call and its content, as well as all relevant details for the evaluation process. This encompassed the planning of all phases (individual evaluation, draft consensus report, consensus meetings and panel ranking), evaluation criteria and sub-criteria, scoring system, score interpretation table and guidelines for writing high-quality reports (i.e. IERs and CRs).

Expert evaluators were selected for their specific scientific expertise; they had been made aware of the transparency requirements and the necessity to disclose any potential conflict of interest (CoI) in order to take necessary measures. This was ensured through specific clauses in each individual's contract and also through an internal check performed by IHI staff.

The observer could raise any questions to all actors without any restrictions. This was a clear indication of the commitment to full transparency in the evaluation exercise.

All applicable procedures and rules, whether general Horizon Europe rules or those specific to this IHI call, were clear and transparent to everyone. The evaluation process was conducted to high standards of diligence, fairness, and transparency throughout the entire evaluation exercise.

Experts were encouraged through 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 on the ranking lists.

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

The time of the overall evaluation process, starting from the submission closure and the remote evaluation was sufficient (10 October – 5 November), including the consensus meeting which took place on 5th November. This was communicated to the experts from the beginning of the process.

Being a second stage evaluation process, each expert evaluator was assigned one proposal to assess and review.

For this, it was sufficient to cover all necessary phases of the evaluation process, including IER preparation, CR drafting and discussion during the consensus meetings, quality check performed by the IHI legal officers and panel meetings for the 2 proposals being evaluated. This allowed experts to complete their work efficiently.

The consensus phase meetings for both topics was completed well within the assigned time schedule. Despite that the workload on both moderators was high, as they had to start their work before and continue after the meetings, yet the moderation proved very effective.

The workload and the time allowed for the quality check, by IHI legal officers, of the CRs appeared to be appropriate. Consensus were achieved after careful consideration of the consensus reports by the experts with the assistance of the panel moderator and the quality checks. Overall, the efficiency of the procedures was maintained, ensuring a thorough and fair evaluation process.

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

The European Commission's Evaluation tool (SEP) was used as the primary document repository for assigning experts to proposals, preparing Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs), Consensus Reports (CRs) and preparing and approving the ranking lists. 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. This system operated smoothly and reliably, with experts finding it intuitive and easy to use.

For the remote consensus phase, the WebEx tool was used. It was familiar to all participants and functioned without any major technical issues. Occasionally, there were minor 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.

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

- **Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality**

The evaluation process was impartial, fair and conducted in full compliance with the applicable Horizon Europe rules. The overall evaluation process was fully compliant with the principles of independence, impartiality, objectivity, accuracy and consistency. Each group of experts was briefed by the responsible IHI staff on the first morning of their evaluation. The guiding principles of independence, impartiality, objectivity, accuracy, and consistency were reiterated several times during the evaluation.

Finally, 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 adhered closely to the rules and criteria specified in the Horizon Europe Grants Manual for assessing project proposals. This included 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 moderator's commitment to ensuring that expert evaluators assessed each proposal section independently and objectively, without veering into broad interpretations or extrapolations. This approach maintained consistency and fairness across all evaluations.

This proactive measure prevented prolonged discussions and ensured that consensus could be reached promptly.

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

It is highlighted that the IHI evaluation process is as robust and of a high quality, if not better, than other national and international research funding schemes.

The main evaluation principles include objectivity and impartiality, independence of evaluators, participation of all parties concerned in the entire process, transparency and focus, reliability, consistency, completeness and clarity of reports, fairness, and protection of the interests of the parties involved. The observer believes that all these principles are well embedded and efficiently implemented in the EU evaluation process including the present IHI evaluation. This ensures that the evaluation is conducted to the highest standards, maintaining fairness and protecting the interests of all parties involved.

3 Any other remarks

All experts (11) and the observer (1) had access to all relevant documents needed to conduct a high-quality evaluation process. 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 quality of the on-site briefing sessions on very high and fully professional.

All experts 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.

All the expert evaluators demonstrated a clear understanding of the award criteria and scoring system.

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.

Overall, the experts demonstrated a solid understanding of their roles, the evaluation criteria, and the importance of maintaining fairness and consistency throughout the evaluation process.

For the evaluation of the 2 proposals reaching the second stage, all the expert evaluators were selected based primarily on their expertise 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. In each topic at least 5 experts were involved with a maximum of 6 in topic 1.

The final panel meeting, which culminated in the preparation of the final ranking list, was conducted efficiently and smoothly. Before finalizing the ranking list, all experts 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 experts.

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 importance of providing high-quality ESRs was clearly emphasized to all experts, 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 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. Throughout both phases of the evaluation process, all IHI staff involved in the evaluation demonstrated a high level of professionalism, supporting the experts in remaining focused on the call specificities. Their high degree of responsiveness and competence significantly contributed to the smooth operation of the evaluation.

All questions raised, either from expert evaluators or the observer, 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.

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

The workload and time given to evaluators for their work was good in all the cases.

The feedback regarding remuneration in relation to workload was generally positive. Nearly all evaluators expressed satisfaction or did not comment on the remuneration issue.

4 Summary of Recommendations

The HORIZON-JU-IHI-2024-06-two-stage (2nd stage) consensus evaluation process is considered successful, transparent, fair and at the highest standard possible based on the Horizon Europe rules.

It was noted that the key differences between stage 1 and stage 2 evaluations need to be further elaborated during the experts' briefing before the central evaluation, particularly regarding the progression from the short proposal to the full proposal.

The observer would like to extend his sincere thanks and gratitude to all IHI staff involved in this evaluation, for their support and invaluable assistance, enabling to fulfil the execution of the tasks, without any hindrance.