SENSITIVE

OBSERVER REPORT

CALL	
Call:	HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-01
Topic(s):	HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA5 HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA2-SNS HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA7
Type(s) of action:	RIA, IA
Service:	EU-Rail
Call deadline:	5 June 2024, 17:00:00
Submission model:	Single

EVALUATION	
Evaluation model:	Single
Panel(s):	Panel 1 IA, Panel 2 RIA
Observer(s):	Michael Garrett

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SUMMARY FOR PUBLICATION

Summary for publication

Include a summary of the main findings for publication in a call update in the Portal, including the overall assessment on the conduct and fairness of the evaluation sessions, and compliance with the applicable rules. (max. 2000 characters).

⚠️ *The content of this section will be published in the Portal as a call update.*

I attended the Consensus Report (CR) meetings for three topics: HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA2-SNS, HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA5, and HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA7. Two panels operated in parallel, evaluating a total of three proposals. My rotation between panels provided a comprehensive overview of their performance. The evaluation was conducted with a high degree of impartiality, fairness, and confidentiality. Panel members diligently upheld their responsibilities, ensuring integrity in the evaluation process. The presence of EU-Rail officers helped maintain adherence to rules and regulations, and any ambiguities were usually quickly clarified. Overall, the evaluation process was of a high standard, comparable to that executed by other national funding agencies I am familiar with (e.g. NSF (USA), STFC (UK), NWO (NL) etc.). The process conformed strictly to applicable rules and guidelines, ensuring a consistent, fair, and transparent evaluation. The overall evaluation was effective and met high-quality standards. The EC's structured approach and the strong support from EU-Rail officers significantly contributed to the successful conduct of the evaluation sessions. Remote meetings via MS Teams were generally efficient and reliable. The commission software used for scoring and reporting worked seamlessly, contributing to the overall efficiency and reliability of the process. The scale and complexity of this evaluation were somewhat limited due to only one proposal being submitted per topic – this greatly simplified the panels' tasks. The focused meeting schedule ensured good progress was made - Panel 1 provided two approved CRs in less than 1.5 meeting days. The meetings could have benefited from a more structured schedule/agenda - long sessions/days without breaks can be counterproductive.

1. BACKGROUND AND SCOPE

Background and scope

This report describes the observer's assessment of the evaluation of the following call:

Call for proposals: HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-01
Deadline: 05.06.2024
Budget: EUR 21.7 MEuro

This call covers the following topics:

HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA2-SNS,
HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA5,
HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA7.

This call covers the following types of action: RIA and IA.

The report analyses the efficiency of the procedures, usability of the instruments (including IT tools), conduct and fairness of the evaluation sessions, and compliance with the applicable rules.

The objective is to give independent advice for improving the evaluation processes for EU funding.

2. OBSERVER ASSESSMENT

Methodology

Methodology

Describe how you proceeded for observing the evaluation procedure (e.g. participation in briefing; present at evaluation session; analysis of IERs, CRs and panel report; comparison with similar procedures at national/international level; etc).

I attended the Consensus Report (CR) meetings for the three topics noted in section 1 above. Two panels operated in parallel with each other. Panel 1 evaluated two proposals submitted for two separate topics HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA2-SNS and HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA5. Panel 2 evaluated one proposal for topic HORIZON-ER-JU-2024-FA7. I typically split myself equally between the two panels, moving from 1 to the other every 45 minutes or so. This rotation gave me a good overview of how the panels were performing. I also attended the introductory briefing session at the start of the first day, and an earlier briefing meeting with one of the EU-Rail officers about a week before the CR meetings began.

In my experience of participating in similar evaluations and processes at national level (USA-NSF, UK-STFC, NL-NWO etc), I think the standard of the evaluation process conducted by the EU bodies implementing Horizon Europe operate at a similar level to most national funding agencies. In some areas it is superior (see later in this report) e.g. the national funding agencies do not typically use independent Observers to provide oversight of the evaluation process. In this sense, this process is more complete.

Assessment

Assessment

Scale of complexity of the evaluation task

The scale and complexity of this evaluation were somewhat limited compared to most of the EC evaluation meetings I have personally been involved in. This was primarily due to only one proposal being received for each topic, resulting in no competing proposals. While the evaluation task itself was relatively straightforward, this was balanced by a focused meeting schedule.

Transparency of the procedures

Having attended the various panel sessions, I can state that the discussions were conducted with a high level of openness and transparency. The exchanges between the experts were thorough, allowing for a wide range of opinions to be expressed on all aspects of the proposals being evaluated. This approach ensured that all panel members had the opportunity to contribute fully to the proceedings and that the decision-making process was transparent and fair. Proposal scores were decided through consensus, and previous discussions facilitated a relatively quick convergence to a common position.

Throughput time of the evaluation and the efficiency of the procedures

The evaluation process demonstrated notable efficiency in terms of throughput. Panel 1, for example, managed to evaluate and provide two approved Consensus Reports (CRs) in less than 1.5 meeting days. This high level of productivity is a testament to the effectiveness and preparedness of the panel members, as well as the structured approach adopted during the sessions. The progress of Panel 2 was slower initially. This was primarily due to technical difficulties, (see below). The EU-RAIL officer provided extra support to keep the panel on track, and the panel eventually overcame these initial setbacks.

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

The meetings were conducted remotely, which proved to be both efficient and reliable. Overall, MS Teams performed very well, with excellent video and sound quality. However, there were some issues with the Panel Recorder for Panel 2, who experienced video stability problems. This resulted in the text on their shared screen often being blurry and unreadable. Additionally, the audio from the panel Recorder was occasionally indistinct. The EU-Rail officer eventually intervened to address these issues.

The commission software used to assign marks to the various evaluation criteria and to write the report worked seamlessly, contributing to the overall efficiency and reliability of the evaluation procedures.

Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality of the evaluation

As stated earlier, the evaluation of the proposals was conducted with a high degree of impartiality, fairness, and confidentiality. The panel members were diligent in upholding their responsibilities in these areas, ensuring that all aspects of the evaluation were handled with the utmost integrity. The presence of the EU-Rail officer at the meetings played a crucial role in maintaining adherence to the established rules and regulations. In instances where there was doubt, guidance from other EU-Rail helped ensure compliance. This collaborative approach helped to maintain the overall fairness and confidentiality of the evaluation process. This was the case for both panels.

Conformity of the evaluation with the applicable rules (including guidance documents)

The evaluation process conformed strictly to the applicable rules and guidance documents. The procedures were meticulously followed, ensuring that each step of the evaluation adhered to the established guidelines. The panel members demonstrated a clear understanding of the rules, and any ambiguities were promptly addressed with the help of the EU-Rail officers present. This adherence to the prescribed rules and guidelines ensured a consistent, fair, and transparent evaluation process. Overall, the conformity with the applicable rules greatly contributed to the integrity and credibility of the evaluation.

Quality of the evaluation process in comparison with similar national/international evaluation procedures

In my experience of participating in similar evaluation processes at the national level, such as those conducted by USA-NSF, UK-STFC, and NL-NWO, I find that the standard of the evaluation process conducted by the EC is comparable to these national funding agencies. National evaluations typically place greater emphasis on public outreach, economic impact, and EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion). At least for this call, the assessment of EDI in the proposals was somewhat unclear. For example, there was some confusion in Panel 2 whether they should be concerned about gender balance within the consortium or gender neutrality in the actual research programme. This is an area that I think needs to be addressed to ensure Horizon Europe (HE) evaluations remain comprehensive and effective.

However, in some respects, the Horizon Europe's evaluation process is superior. A notable distinction is that national funding agencies typically do not employ independent observers to provide oversight of the evaluation process. This additional layer of oversight makes the HE process more robust and comprehensive. The role of the observer is valuable, but it remains unclear how the feedback provided by observers is utilised in the context of HE rules and evaluation guidance and whether it significantly impacts the conduct of future evaluations.

Overall quality of the evaluation

The overall quality of the evaluation process was good. The panel members exhibited a high level of expertise and professionalism, ensuring that the discussions were thorough and insightful. The gender balance within the panels was relatively poor and could be improved upon. The panel appeared to understand their role and remit. The evaluation process was well-structured, allowing for comprehensive

evaluation of each proposal. Despite some initial technical difficulties, particularly with Panel 2's video connection, these issues were promptly addressed, minimising their impact on the overall process.

The use of IT tools, such as MS Teams for the remote meetings and the commission software for assigning marks and drafting/submitting reports, significantly contributed to the efficiency and reliability of the evaluation. The EU-Rail officers provided essential support throughout the sessions, ensuring adherence to the rules and regulations and facilitating clear and transparent communication among panel members. EU-Rail also checked draft versions of the CRs to ensure the remarks were robust, and based on a proper comparison between the text of Call and the proposal. The onsite briefings presented by EU-Rail officers were good and comprehensive. The EU-Rail officers appeared to be competent, and responsive to the need of the panels.

Furthermore, the evaluation process was conducted with a strong emphasis on impartiality, fairness, and confidentiality, which reinforced the integrity of the proceedings. While there are areas for improvement (see other remarks below), the overall process was effective and met high standards of quality.

Other remarks

I have some observations and suggestions that EU-Rail might find useful.

Time Management and Breaks: Long sessions without breaks are counterproductive. Regular breaks are essential for maintaining efficiency, promoting health, and fostering an inclusive environment. Meetings should be split into morning and afternoon sessions with scheduled breaks, including lunch, to support EDI (Equality, Diversity & Inclusion) principles. Running meetings beyond 17:00 is particularly challenging for those with caring responsibilities.

Technical Issues and Remote Meeting Etiquette: Basic rules of remote video etiquette should be emphasised at the start of the review meeting, e.g. keeping video on, muting when not speaking, and using hand-raising to intervene. Clear identification of participants in MS Teams is crucial. All participants should have their names and affiliations visible to avoid confusion and ensure transparency. It would be useful to test the quality of the video link for Panel Recorders in advance of any remote CR meeting.

Documentation for the Independent Observers: Observers should be provided with a short, dedicated 1 page document outlining their role and links to the process before the consensus meeting takes place. They should also receive the Observer Report Template in advance of the meeting taking place.

Gender and EDI Considerations: EU-Rail needs to provide clearer guidelines on how gender and EDI issues should be evaluated.

Competitive funding environment: EU-RAIL may wish to consider mechanisms that could encourage a greater number of high-quality submissions to these calls. Ensuring a competitive environment will help guarantee that the most innovative and effective projects are funded, providing the best value for the investment and supporting the further development of the European rail system.

Renumeration of evaluators: Towards the end of the final remote session, one or two members of Panel 2 expressed frustration on this point, feeling that the Horizon Europe rules and guidance underestimated the amount of time experts spent preparing for the Consensus Report (CR) meetings and completing the Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs). It is unclear whether this frustration is widespread. However, it is evident that the payment fee for Horizon Europe experts has remained static over many years, despite substantial increases in inflation.

Recommendations

Recommendations

1. Emphasise basic rules of remote meeting etiquette at the start of the evaluation.

2. Ensure clear identification of all participants in MS Teams.

3. Ensure technical competence and good network connections for CR Recorders in advance of the evaluations.

4. Use MS Teams chat function to post break and session reconvene times.

5. Schedule regular breaks and structure meeting times to promote EDI principles.

6. Provide a short and focused document outlining the Observer's role in the process – the report template provides a good starting point.

7. Provide the Observer with the Report Template in advance of the evaluation meeting.

8. Provide clearer guidelines on evaluating gender and EDI issues.

9. EU-RAIL may wish to consider whether there is a need to encourage a greater number of high-quality submissions to these calls.

10. The EC should consider whether the payment fees for Horizon Europe experts continues to be at the right renumeration level.