



SENSITIVE

OBSERVER REPORT

CALL	
Call:	HORIZON-JU-ER-2026-01
Topic(s):	HORIZON-JU-ER-2026-01-FA6/FA7-01 HORIZON-JU-ER-2026-01-FA7-01
Type(s) of action:	Research and Innovation Action
Service:	Europe's Rail Joint Undertaking
Call deadline:	07/05/2026
Submission model:	single

EVALUATION	
Evaluation model:	single
Panel(s):	HORIZON-JU-ER-2026-01
Observer(s):	Keith Adrian HARRAP

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY FOR PUBLICATION	3
1. BACKGROUND AND SCOPE	4
2. OBSERVER ASSESSMENT	4

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.

This was an evaluation of high quality and the functioning and operation of the consensus process worked well and was conducted fairly. The various actors involved, Expert evaluators, Recorder, Panel Moderator and Quality Control, fulfilled their roles effectively and efficiently. The procedures employed for the evaluation were transparent and the required timings and efficiency of the entire evaluation workload were effectively managed both during the consensus working days of the evaluation and by prior email reminders of required starting times and access to the requisite Teams meetings. Usability and reliability of the entire evaluation process were assured and applicable rules and guidance were complied with.

The information provided to support the evaluation was of high quality. It was initially presented in the form of a briefing which also provided links to other relevant documents. These were examined and key aspects relevant to the evaluation work were noted. A road map through this mass of information would be valuable indicating the particular features to note at various stages of the proposal evaluation process – for example at the outset, midway as the assessment of content is being developed for the IER and near the conclusion of the process as a checklist to confirm that the required aspects have been dealt with in drafting the IER.

Although the outcome of consensus meeting discussions on proposal criteria and their sub-criteria generally resulted in a CR of good quality, the time taken to achieve this could be lengthy. The need for a chairman to guide such discussions was apparent to keep things on track and make effective use of the time available.

The admissibility condition for a Research and Innovation Action application not to exceed 70 pages was commented on by Experts to the effect that stating this figure can result in it being interpreted as an aim and if shorter proposals were desirable this should be stated.

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-JU-ER-2026-01

Deadline: 07/05/2026

Budget: EUR million 6.1

This call covers the following topic(s)/type(s) of action: RIA

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).

A briefing for the Observer was provided largely as a presentation by the Call Coordinator. The presentation document was provided subsequently and this was studied in detail particularly to retrieve documentation specified in the various links provided. Notes were made of key points in each of these that were deemed relevant to the functioning of the evaluation. Documents provided via links in the briefing presentation to the Observer were:

- EURail Work Programme 2026 including Annex VIII
- Europe's Rail Joint Undertaking Multi-Annual Work programme
- A Future Policy-Based Public Private Partnership for Rail
- Functioning of the Europe's Rail JU
- Europe's Rail Key Documents including Master Plan and Financial Rules

Similar briefings both for Experts and the Recorder (Rapporteur) were also provided and considered in the same way.

Contact was established between the Expert evaluators and the Observer facilitated by the Call Coordinator providing email contact details. The Observer then sought any views the Experts might have on the functioning of the evaluation process and the quality and appropriateness of information provided.

The eligibility check and allocation of the proposals to evaluators were both undertaken by EURail-JU Commission officials. The evaluation and consensus work of the Evaluation were done remotely and access to various aspects of the inputs required (such as SEP - Submission and Evaluation of Proposals) were dependent on the EU Login procedure and the two-step authentication required. This was a significant problem for the Observer during the initial stage of the evaluation work.

The concluding stage of the evaluation requiring input from the Experts and others such as the Recorder and the Panel Moderator was the Consensus meeting ranking for each proposal and in consequence the production of the Panel report and the Panel ranked list as undertaken by EURail - JU Commission officials. The latter was not seen by the Observer possibly because no ranking was necessary.

The ineligibility of one proposal was discovered late and work on it had already been started by some Experts. The proposal had to be removed resulting in four rather than five proposals being evaluated, two in each Destination topic.

Assessment

Assessment

Scale of complexity of the evaluation task

The Consensus meeting stages of the evaluation were undertaken remotely using Microsoft Teams software. Overall the evaluation was of modest scale with only four eligible Proposals involved eventually (HyperSafe; Prefer; Safelooop and ULHyT4E). A fifth Proposal (LMR2MS) was deemed ineligible somewhat late after the evaluation (IER) work had started. Some Expert evaluators were not aware of this ineligibility until the end of the evaluation and had undertaken work on the Proposal that was unnecessary.

There were some particular features of the Call to take into account during the evaluation. For example: evaluation specificities of EU-RAIL-JU as in Annex VIII of 2026 Call for proposals of the AWP; eligible costs taking the form of a Lump Sum; and involvement of a Private members financial contribution in addition to the EU contribution of up to the same amount.

Transparency of the procedures

For this Observer the procedures employed for the evaluation were clear and transparent with the possible exception of the explicit derivation of the Panel report from the CRs submitted at the end of the evaluation.

Throughput time of the evaluation and the efficiency of the procedures

The required timings and efficiency of the entire evaluation workload were very effectively managed by the Panel Moderator both during the consensus working days of the evaluation and by prior email reminders of agreed starting times and access to the requisite Teams meetings. Usability and reliability of the evaluation process was therefore assured. Applicable rules and guidance were complied with.

Although the outcome of consensus meeting discussions on Proposal Criteria and their sub-criteria (SC) generally resulted in a CR of good quality overall, the time taken to achieve this could be lengthy. The Recorder has to devote time and energy to thinking through possible textual options - a complex task - and the Panel Moderator had to keep reminding the Expert evaluators that it is they and not Commission officials who must take the decisions. At times any attempt by either of them to steer discussion in a meaningful way would be disregarded and more emphasis given by an Expert to expressing an individual point of view on something else.

In the opinion of this Observer the need for a chairman to guide such discussions was quite apparent in order to keep things on track and make effective use of the time available. One Expert could be nominated for such a chairmanship role or another Expert be appointed for the purpose.

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

The evaluation was done remotely and needed use of the EULogin to provide access to SEP (Submission and Evaluation Portal) in use as the online tool to evaluate the EU-Rail-JU proposals. The Observer initially had difficulty accessing the Evaluation service via EULogin using 2-step authentication. Despite one-to-one assistance from the Call Coordinator this was not resolved and was referred to the EC-ServiceNow helpdesk for eventual solution. After the frustration of these initial problems the IT system operated without further difficulty.

The information provided to support the evaluation was of high quality. It was initially presented in the form of a briefing to the Observer by the Call Coordinator a copy of which was provided later. The presentation also provided links to other relevant documents which were examined and key aspects relevant to the evaluation work were noted. Similar briefing presentations to the Recorder (Rapporteur) and the Experts were provided on request and also similarly annotated. Several slides were duplicated in the three briefing presentations but that for the Expert evaluators was by far the most extensive amounting to 139 slides including back-ups. If there is a criticism of the approach it is that there is an overload of information all provided at one time encompassing the entire evaluation process. A road map through this mass of information would be valuable.

The Recorder's role in achieving an acceptable draft Consensus report (CR) is crucial and in this evaluation the contribution made here was excellent. At times though there could be difficulty in getting agreement on the text as the discussion by the Experts did not always focus on the questions put by the Recorder (and the Panel Moderator) regarding content or phraseology in the CR. Instead responses would jump around with different opinions on unrelated or quite minor items.

Another area of time-consuming discussion could be the number and relevance of examples necessary to confirm a view expressed in the proposed text even though this might not have any influence on the eventual scoring.

The descriptors (e.g. weakness, shortcoming, minor shortcoming) used for a sub-criterion (SC) under a specific Criterion (Excellence; Impact; and Quality and Efficiency of the Implementation) are quite subjective (See Slides 27 and 28 of Expert evaluators briefing) and in consequence could provoke much discussion and difference of opinion between Expert evaluators.

This was particularly so as a result of quantifying the different types of descriptor in order to derive a score rather than preserving some flexibility in this process. Comparison was made at times between the SC of different Criteria as an argument for maintaining consistency whereas in fact the context in different Criteria can be different. It is appropriate that the descriptors used and their number should inform the score but they should not determine it.

Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality of the evaluation

The briefings and the links provided to other supporting documentation were a key component, often enhanced by Commission staff inputs, to emphasising and ensuring the confidentiality, impartiality and fairness of the evaluation process which the Observer can confirm.

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

The extensive information provided on EU-Rail-JU Work Programme and Call gave those involved a good understanding of the characteristics of the Call and ensured conformity with the applicable rules and guidelines which the Observer confirms.

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

The Observer had no examples of research evaluation in other organisations from which the Commission might learn. In his experience the position was more the opposite in that other organisations might recognise the value of a group consensus process in evaluating research proposals and the Commission approach to achieving this.

One Expert provided an example of evaluation work undertaken for another organisation where only a single evaluator was used and meetings with the proposer might be arranged.

Overall quality of the evaluation

This was an evaluation of high quality and the functioning and operation of the consensus process worked well and was conducted fairly primarily as a result of the Panel Moderator's input. The various actors involved, Expert evaluators, Recorder, Panel Moderator and Quality Control, fulfilled their roles effectively and efficiently.

Where the Observer noted particular features of the consensus process as recorded in this report these were generally of an intermittent nature and so not necessarily intrinsic to the entire operation of the evaluation. They are recorded here as a contribution to discussion of any improvements to the consensus process in particular.

One interesting question that arose during the present evaluation was that for one proposal QC had a preference for the citing of actual monetary value of resources identified in relation to various tasks or activities. The Expert evaluators preferred a percentage figure in such a situation as this provided a view of the proportionalities involved whereas a monetary value did not.

Recommendations**Recommendations**

- A road map should be provided to facilitate location of appropriate information sources, primarily in the briefings provided, that relate to stages of development of the IER.
- Expert evaluators should limit the time they spend suggesting or editing CR text and leave this task to the Recorder.
- A chairmanship function should be created for the consensus meetings to provide a steer to the discussion which would support both the Recorder and the Panel Moderator and could also embrace both some QC and ESR oversight responsibilities.

- The strict relationship of type and quantity of sub-criterion(SC) descriptors, which are themselves subjective, into the generation of a score should be relaxed.
- The linkage between the submitted CRs and the Panel report should be made more explicit for the Expert evaluators group so that the outcomes of the evaluation work undertaken are clear for those who were involved.
- In remote evaluations access to the necessary tools such as SEP via the EULogin procedure is crucial so an emergency back-up should be available after signing of contracts in the event that access is found to be problematic.
- The stated limit of a 70 page length for the proposal/application creates a risk of it being interpreted as an aim so the desirability of having shorter proposal documents should be made clear