EDCTP2 INDEPENDENT OBSERVER'S REPORT

CALL ID

RIA2020S - Strategic actions to maximise the impact of research on reducing disease burden, in collaboration with development cooperation initiatives
Call deadline: 13 August 2020

Single Stage Evaluation

Date of Evaluation 16 - 18 November 2020

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Following the evaluation: 16 - 18 November 2020

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

Date and Signature

7 December 2020

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Abbreviations

EDCTP2 - European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership

H2020 - Horizon 2020 Programme for Research and Innovation

IER - Independent Evaluation Report

ESR - Evaluation Summary Report

IO - Independent Observer

SRC - Scientific Review Committee

1.   Executive Summary

- **Overview**

This report covers the evaluation procedure of the single stage Call[1]

> **RIA2020S -** Strategic actions to maximise the impact of research on reducing disease burden, in collaboration with development cooperation initiatives
> **Call deadline: 13 August 2020 - 16 eligible applications**

Due to the coronavirus pandemic the Scientific Review Committee meeting (SRC meeting), usually taking place in Den Haag, was exchanged for a remote video conference meeting, organized by the EDCTP secretariat.

Prior to the meeting of the SRC, individual evaluations had been carried out remotely at the independent expert reviewers' home or place of work involving the completion of an individual evaluation report (IER). Guidance for the experts on how to do this was given in documents, prepared by the EDCPT secretariat[2].

For each proposal the EDCTP secretariat appointed a rapporteur. Once the IERs were completed, the rapporteur received these reports and prepared a **draft** summary evaluation report.

The SRCs acted **first as consensus group**. On the basis of the IERS and the draft summary evaluation report the proposals were discussed, agreement on scores and comments was reached and the Consensus Evaluation Reports were formulated.

In a second step the SRCs acted as panel group. Prior to the ranking there was a last chance to revisit the scores again, having had time to reflect the outcome so far. This was done in two cases. Then the ranking list for the Call was produced. In case of identical scores, the ranking according to the rules had to be established. These rules together with an outline of the whole range of activities were provided by the EDCTP secretariat in another document[3].

- **Conclusion**

The evaluation procedure I have observed was well structured and managed by the EDCTP secretariat. The relevant expertise, diversity and quality of work produced by evaluators appointed by the secretariat were found to be very good.

The high standard of expertise of the evaluators and the professionalism and dedication of EDCT staff ensured an **impartial and fair review process**.

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[1] For details see: http://www.edctp.org/funding-opportunities/calls/

[2] EDCTP2 - Guidance for expert reviewers, July 2020 - Version 6.0 **and** EDCTPgrants - Guide for review rapporteurs and confirmers **and** RIA2020S_SRC_Meeting_November_2020.pdf

[3] EDCTP2 - Guidance for Expert Reviewers attending Scientific Review Committee Meetings (full proposals), October 2020 - Version 7.0, provided via EDCTPgrants

At the end of these two and a half days I can say, that I have observed consensus meetings of highest quality, with no difference in execution compared to face to face meetings and I was impressed by this fact.

My conclusion is, that the scientific evaluations have been carried out in a just, transparent and unbiased manner. The ranked lists of applications selected for funding **have been produced according to the Regulation (EU) No 1290/2013**, as requested in DECISION No 556/2014/EU.

- **Key observation for the Call**

  Feedbacks

To make the evaluation process as transparent as possible and to exclude factual errors or misunderstandings there are two forms of feedbacks in case of EDCTP:

- Prior to the SRC meeting, there is a chance for a rebuttal: IERs in anonymized form were sent to the applicants in order to give them the chance to comment them. All further steps - the drafting of the ESR as well as the following discussions in the SRC - take place with the knowledge of these comments[4].

- In the consensus meetings the drafts of the Evaluation Summary Reports (ESRs) - provided by the respective rapporteurs on the basis of the Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs) - were discussed and finalized. In two cases, the evaluators expressed their wish to revisit scores again, having had more time to reflect the outcome so far. This was done the next day in the panel meeting, in line with the evaluation rules. The final versions of the ESRs then were signed by the rapporteur and the confirmers. **These final version of the ESR were sent as feedback to the applicants.**

As already said, these two kinds of feedback are related to the evaluation process.

But what is missing is another and very common kind of feedback. To the regret of a number of reviewers at present **there is no systematic way to formulate recommendations for the improvement of proposals**. Recommendations, which could be helpful, even in case of proposals, foreseen for funding[5].

Such a feedback could be a way to provide suggestions and make them known to the applicant, however not binding and the applicant would be free to take them into account or ignore them. One possibility is to add to the "Consensus-evaluation-summary-template" a further box. As observer I have seen such expansions in other H2020 programmes with a heading like "Any other remarks on this proposal which

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[4] Rebuttals as part of the evaluation procedure are a distinct feature of EDCTP evaluations. According to H2020 evaluation rules rebuttals have to be restricted to correct possible factual errors or misunderstandings. The significance of rebuttals has been discussed in detail in the observer reports so far; for details I refer to the previous reports (https://www.edctp.org/funding/transparancy/independent-observers/#)

[5] In the past (to be precise fp7 and earlier funding programmes) suggestions for improvements were more or less customary and were part of the ESR. In case, such suggestions were formulated as mandatory they had to be considered in the preparation of the grant. Since this, as a rule, led to long discussions, this increased the "time-to-grant", because of this, this practice was given up in H2020.

may be of assistance to the consortium if it is selected for grant preparation".

My recommendation therefore is:

Recommendation 1:

Add to the Consensus-evaluation-summary-template a small (fourth) box, giving space for constructive remarks, respectively improvements of a proposal. According to H2020 rules these are only notes for the applicants. It is the responsibility of the applicant to take them into account or not.

2. Introduction and approach taken by the observer

As independent observer I received relevant background documents by email prior to the meeting and was given access to the web portal EDCTPgrants, where further documents and the applications together with the IERs were supplied.

I attended the SRC videoconference-meeting during 2 and 1/2 working days in the time 16 to 18 November 2020. The meeting was opened by the executive director Michael Makanga and was followed by a presentation (see ref. 2: RIA2020S_SRC_ Meeting_2020.pdf).

The basics of my task have been laid down in my contract:

> "The expert in forming his opinion must critically assess the way in which evaluators apply the evaluation criteria, and how the evaluation procedures could be improved. The expert must verify that the procedures followed for the submission of proposals and the related evaluation, selection and award procedures are consistent with H2020 guidelines."

3. Observations of the process

Preparation of the Scientific Review Committee meeting

As preparation for their work the independent expert reviewers received the documents
  (1) EDCTP2 - Guidance for expert reviewers; now in version 6.0 from July 2020 (the basics of the individual evaluations)
  (2) EDCTPgrants - Guide for review rapporteurs and confirmers (EDCTPgrants is the software tool to enable the reviewers (remote) work)
  (3) EDCTP2 - Guidance for Expert Reviewers attending Scientific Review Committee Meetings, now version 7.0 from October 2020 (roles and responsibilities before, during and after the meeting)
and the already mentioned
  (4) RIA2020S_SRC_ Meeting_November_2020.pdf, which was presented again at the onset of the meeting (introduction, summary of the aforementioned documents and at the same time reminder)

These excellently written documents, concise and easy to read, have been updated since my first involvement in EDCP as observer. Two of the modifications are related to recommendations of the observers, followed by discussions with the EDCTP secretariat. As a whole, I consider the updated versions as clarifications and improvements of the evaluation process.

Moderation of the meeting

The SRC meeting was moderated by an EDCTP project officer, as described in the Guidance for expert reviewers (ref. 3). This now is the standard procedure. However, under particular circumstances an external scientist or an SRC member are still eligible.

With the decision, to select as moderator someone who has an expert knowledge of the rules and procedures of the EDCTP evaluation and who is supported by 5-6 scientists - the rapporteur and the confirmers - chosen due to their respective scientific expertise, a good balance of the tasks has been achieved.

The moderation of an SRC meeting is a challenging task and this is even more the case, when the meeting is carried out as a videoconference. My impression is, that the well-structured management of the process together with the excellent preparatory documents, the skills of the moderator, the rapporteur and the evaluators made this meeting a success.

As in the past, this was supported by a concise agenda with a strict time schedule. This schedule was - with minor exceptions - met. This is a remarkable result of the moderation and the collaboration of all experts involved.

Another small change, already mentioned, has been introduced. The number of confirmers has been increased from formerly two to all scientists involved in the individual evaluation of the proposal in question. In this case, up to 5 or 6 independent experts (including the rapporteur) - all taking part in the SRC meeting - had to sign the final ESR. To my opinion, this is not just the change of a formality, instead, it emphasizes the importance and the responsibility of the individual contributions of the evaluators, giving the common consensus more weight.

Further details are not necessary to be mentioned here again, since the process - as far as unchanged - already has been described and commented elsewhere in other IO Reports[6].

Gender balance

7 out of 18 reviewers have been female. The percentage (appr. 39%) of contributions by female reviewers was - with a view to the IERs submitted - slightly increased to appr. 44%. I consider this a well acceptable gender balance in contribution.

Potential conflicts of interest and restrictions

None of the reviewers had a direct conflict (involvement) with any application. In addition to this it is standard practice for EDCTP to restrict experts from applications from his/her institution - they do not receive the documents of such applications and do not participate in the respective consensus discussion. In case of a videoconference this is easy to handle on technical grounds. For the time of the debate they simply were excluded from the discussion and for this time they only had access to a so-called "waiting room".

During the panel meeting, i.e. when the ranking was conducted all reviewers were present. However, reviewers didn't participate in the discussion of any proposal for

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[6] See https://www.edctp.org/funding/transparancy/independent-observers/

which they were 'restricted'. These procedures for consensus as well as panel meetings were carefully followed.

4.   Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Add to the Consensus-evaluation-summary-template a small (fourth) box, giving space for constructive remarks, respectively improvements of a proposal. According to H2020 rules these are only notes for the applicants. It is the responsibility of the applicant to take them into account or not.

General recommendation with respect to videoconferences

SRC meetings as remote meetings, using a video conference tool are an option, respectively a necessity under the current circumstances of a pandemic. With the organization, the material provided and the management as described in this report and in particular the dedication of the independent experts and the EDCTP staff, the video conference format gives equivalent results as compared to onsite face to face meetings. **Nevertheless, if there is a choice, my recommendation is to stay with onsite consensus meetings.**