

H2020

**Independent Observer's Report
on the conduct of the evaluation process and the
application of the selection criteria**

Final findings and conclusions

**The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT)
2014 Call for Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) proposals**

14 February – 9 December 2014

Prof. Manfred Horvat

Presence at meetings related to the evaluation:

22 September, 29 September, 29-30 October,
8 December 2014

1. Summary – Findings and conclusions

The general impression of the IO and the interviewed experts was that the evaluation procedure for the 2014 KIC call was a very well organised and implemented exercise. For all stages and elements of the evaluation process the overall assessment was generally very positive. According to the experts, the whole overall process was designed transparently and set up well.

The EIT succeeded to select and invite excellent experts that each presented a high level of individual expertise. Together, they formed very well balanced panels of complementary competence and experience very much appropriate for the evaluation task. There was a good geographical distribution. From ten experts there were three women.

The Conflict of Interest issue was handled with great care and there was no single sign of undue interest or preference from any member of the expert group. That is a substantial achievement considering the large numbers of organisations involved in the proposals.

In both panels, the proposals were treated with equal care and precision in a spirit of impartiality and fairness.

The different elements of the exercise were all characterised by a very good to excellent quality standard. Improvements are possible with regard to timing.

The documentation available as information material was adequate and comprehensive. It was important for ensuring the understanding of the objectives of the Call, the EIT and KIC model and the evaluation procedure.

The reactions to the evaluation criteria were between mixed and good. In general, they were accepted and there were no severe problems applying them appropriately. There were overlaps between the Criteria 2.1 and 2.2 and 3.1 and 3.2. The vast majority of the experts welcomed the definition of the scores and had no problem applying them.

The overall quality of the Individual Evaluation Reports prepared during the remote part of the evaluation was very good. In the majority of cases, experts provided substantial and detailed comments that were also coherent with the scores given.

Experts, in general, supported the consensus approach which was seen as particularly appropriate in the case of the KICs that have many dimensions and for the evaluation a broad spectrum of expertise and perspectives needs to be integrated. For arriving at such integration a moderated interactive process involving experts with different backgrounds is an optimal approach. In the course of the discussions experts had the possibility to review their individual evaluation and eventually adapt or fine-tune their assessment. The consensus finding approach applied by the EIT building on the long-standing experience of the EU Framework Programme is an example of best evaluation practice also at international level.

The dynamics in the panels during the consensus meeting was very good. Especially in the Health panel that had to deal with five proposals there was clear evidence of a learning process from the first proposal onwards. Particularly in the Health panel the efficiency of the process was appreciated.

The EIT staff managing the process as moderators performed well. They coped differently well with managing the time pressure, which, however, may also be connected to the fact that in the two panels were also different personalities which caused substantial tension in one panel. However, the IO is able to confirm that in all stages of the process the overall conduct of the EIT staff was excellent or close to excellent especially with regard to responsiveness and competence.

Participation via Skype worked reasonably well in one panel but was not satisfactory in the other one. The Consensus Reports and in the following the Evaluation Summary Reports produced by the experts were of high quality. The IO is able to confirm that they exceeded the quality of reports he has seen in other evaluation exercises he has been involved.

The final quality check by EIT staff is a sensible issue and has to be handled with great care. Experts are extremely sensible against correcting their texts and any impression that the EIT staffs want to influence the outcome of the evaluation has to be avoided. The IO confirms that there was not the slightest sign of an attempt in that direction but the nervous reactions of some experts in that stage of the evaluation is a well known phenomenon. It was a good approach of one of the moderators defining the quality check just as proof reading.

The structure of the proposals was adequate including the limit to 50 pages.

The structures and contents of the main part of the proposal followed the evaluation criteria and were consistent with the call text.

The IT tool was appreciated by the vast majority of the experts.

Several experts felt that the remuneration is not adequate in relation to the complexity of the work, the workload and also the necessary expenditure of time including travel time coming from far away or from very remote places or another continent.

2. Quality of the documentation

The following core information material was made available for the call:

- EIT 2014 Call for KICs: Criteria for the Selection of KICs
- 2014 Call for Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) proposals
- Innovate! Join the EIT – and help Europe advance. Framework of Guidance. 2014 Call for KIC proposals
- Indicative thematic factsheets from the EIT Strategic Innovation Agenda
- Briefing Note for the Panel of Experts Evaluating KIC Proposals (including Annex 1. Selection Criteria, Annex 2. Individual Evaluation Report template)

All documentation was excellent, adequate and elaborate, fit for the purpose providing sufficiently detailed information in a clear and comprehensive way. The information material prepared the ground for the experts' understanding of the EIT and the KICs as well as the evaluation procedure. In general, the information material was very well appropriate for the call. There were some opinions that the call text could have been shorter and more succinct. .

Despite the overall top quality of the documentation, several experts pointed out that for some elements of the KICs more precise guidelines and instructions should be provided in the future. That holds especially for the framing of collocation centres, the legal entity, as well as the business model and the financial plan.

3. The Experts' Briefing Meeting

The Briefing Meeting was close to perfect, and contributed substantially and convincingly to the clarification of many issues. The atmosphere was good and friendly and questions were answered politely.

The structure of the meeting was well very well thought-through and provided comprehensive information and explanations about the following topics:

- The EIT,
- The KIC model,
- The call for proposals,
- The evaluation process (main stages of the evaluation process and its timeline; selection criteria; panels of experts; scoring),
- Synergies and complementarities between the EIT, the KICs and other EU Policy and Funding Instruments,
- Organisation of the consensus meetings,
- Use of the SEP system, and
- Legal issues.

A few experts though found the briefing meeting too long, extensive or even excessive.

In the view of the IO, the meeting had a double purpose: information and community building between the experts. A positive effect of the briefing meeting was that the experts met for the first time and got acquainted with each other and in particular with the colleagues of their panel.

In general, based on the experience of their first meeting the experts were satisfied or even impressed by the quality and expertise collected in the panels. In summary, the IO confirms that the meeting was no waste of time and resources and presented a valuable element of the whole procedure.

The presentations were very well prepared and the EIT director and staff did an excellent job with additional explanations and responses to the questions related to the details of the call but also addressing conceptual issues of the EIT and KIC.

The meeting was handled very well by the chair; also the other officers of the EIT did a very good job and showed a high level of responsiveness and competence. They answered to the questions and discussion points with regard to all details of the call and the evaluation process and procedure as well as to the concept of the EIT in great detail and to the point which was appreciated by the experts. All parts of those discussions played an important role and contributed to the development of a common understanding of the issues at stake.

Experts were very much satisfied after the meeting and appreciated the gathering as good kick-off for their work.

4. The Evaluation and Selection Criteria

Defining the Evaluation and Selection Criteria and scoring is always the hardest issue of evaluation and selection exercises. The Commission has a long-standing history, experience and track record in that area which is also recognized at the international stage. The present evaluation procedure designed by the EIT builds very well on the foundations laid by the first KIC call and lessons learnt from that experience were considered and utilised in the best possible way. In addition, the EIT succeeded to adapt the conditions for the call for new KICs in an appropriate way to Horizon 2020 where the EIT is part of now.

Evaluation criteria are appropriate and well structured in terms of the three key categories strategy, operations and impact. Sub-criteria and the accompanying indicative list of evaluation questions for experts need to be reconsidered and fine-tuned.

Sub-criteria were unnecessarily overlapping and duplicative. Each item had too many components that were intended to contribute to each item scored. In detail:

- 2.1 and 2.2 are overlapping (in the proposals as well);
- 3.1 and 3.2 have overlaps too;
- Partnership and business plan should be in the same part.

Some experts pleaded to remove the evaluation questions entirely. However, a light majority of the experts welcomed such questions in principle as helpful for the evaluation. Experts pointed out that there were too many questions attached to each criterion; if one wanted to

cover all aspects precisely the 2000 character space provided by the IT system would not accommodate it.

The IO supports the idea of the accompanying evaluation questions but there is certainly room for improvement in that respect.

However, it is important for the IO to confirm that possible problems or uncertainties caused by the sub-criteria and the questions were handled by both panels very well with the help of the moderators and they had no negative impact on the evaluation and the evaluation results.

It was welcomed that experts were asked to identify Strengths and Weaknesses, even considering that assessing just strong and weak points is not always the best way for judging a proposal and categorisation in binary way may be problematic. However, the majority of experts were satisfied with that approach.

The vast majority of the experts welcomed the definition of the scores and had no problem applying them.

5. The Remote Evaluation

The remote part of the evaluation exercise meant a heavy task for the experts due to the amount of very concentrated and tight information provided in the different parts of the proposal.

The four days allocated for each proposal were mostly seen as acceptable, appropriate and sufficient acceptable, appropriate and. The other aspect of the timing is fitting/integrating the time needed for the evaluation into the working life and day job and agendas of experts was difficult: overall time span available was too short for some proposers. Several experts pointed out that more time for the remote evaluation would have been welcome.

The structure of the Individual Evaluation Report was well designed.

Several experts found reading and assessing all the “declarations from each of the partners on their motivation and endorsement of the proposal and their commitment, including financial commitment (indicative budget per partner) to the objectives and aims of the KIC very difficult

Experts found the evaluation of the financial plans difficult. Defining a common structure and requesting certain information from proposers or asking a set of budget related questions would be helpful.

Individual Evaluation Reports delivered by the experts were largely very good. In some rare cases, comments by experts were too short and lacking substance.

Many experts complained about the limitation to maximum 2000 characters, which caused problems when using the SEP IT tool.

6. The Consolidation and Ranking Meeting – The Consensus Meeting

In general, the Consensus Meetings worked fine, experts found the system appropriate, and the approach towards reaching a consensus was assessed positively.

It is important that the **EIT moderator** facilitates keeping the discussion on track, ensuring that all experts were able to make their points, the criteria and scores were applied in the right way and all relevant aspects of the proposals were taken into account. In general, however, with the exception of some problems with regard to coping with the time pressure, the role of the EIT staff as moderators and advisors was seen as useful, adequate and well appreciated. In the majority of situations, their approach was characterised by a good balance between respect and an appropriate level of resoluteness. The vast majority of the experts characterised the EIT officers as competent and friendly as well as highly motivated and engaged.

The **time available** for the on-site consensus meetings was not sufficient and needed some “pushing” towards coming to a decision. Some experts felt under stress when wanting to discuss everything in great detail.

The tight timing led to substantive time-pressure, which caused also one moderator to intervene substantially into structuring the process, which was felt unfortunate and inappropriate by some experts. In such situations, “diplomacy” is called for on the side of the moderator.

The role and tasks of the **rapporteur** and the draft Consensus Report (CR) should be better defined. It was seen as positive that both experienced and less experienced rapporteurs were involved. Taking only very experienced rapporteurs might bear the danger that the process becomes too much kind of routine or almost bureaucratic. A good mix of rapporteurs enriches the exercise.

The issue of the “**final quality check**” is a sensitive one. In any case any impression of an undue “intervention” of the EIT staff must be avoided. Although the IO did not observe a real major problem in that direction during the present evaluation some tension was observable and in combination with the real time pressure and constraint the IO could feel the sensitivity of the experts at that stage.

The finalisation of the **Evaluation Summary Report (ESR)** was not possible on site in all cases due to the time constraints and limitations. The ex-post corrections via exchange of emails worked because of the clear commitment and cooperative spirit of all persons involved. However, in the future, such a situation should be avoided.

The use of **Skype** is problematic. For one expert in one panel the participation through Skype was a big disappointment

Skype worked rather well in the other panel but it is certainly not an optimal situation.

Experts felt comfortable with the **composition of the panels** and with the quality and the complementarity of the expertise of their expert colleagues.

7. The Proposals

The **structure of the proposals** was appropriate, it was defined by the call and the criteria respectively; the differences between the proposals gave the “ammunition” for the experts.

Most experts emphasised that in some parts of the proposals **standardised information** through scoreboards, indicator tables, format for financial numbers (profit, loss, cash flow), risk management matrix could make the job for applicants and experts much easier.

Most of the experts supported the **limit of 50 pages**. Some experts raised some doubts if it was necessary to send them the complete proposal with all the **declarations of partners**. The EIT staff would anyway check if the proposals are complete and all declarations are signed etc. However, others found the declarations useful but voluminous and difficult to digest, also because of the different formats applied.

Many experts mentioned that they had problems to assess the adequacy of the **legal entities**.

8. The SEP IT tool

In general, experts were perfectly satisfied with the IT tool and found it well designed, simple and user-friendly.

One point mentioned by several experts was the **limit to 2000 characters** which, in addition, for some experts came as a surprise because they had not been aware of it before using the SEP IT tool. It was mentioned that the space limit means, of course, also a limit to the details of the comments, which in some cases was a disadvantage..

Annex

The Independent Observer's (IO's) task and approach

According to the Terms of Reference, the Independent Observer (IO) will give independent advice to the EIT on:

- the conduct of the evaluation process,
- on the application of the selection criteria by the experts and
- on ways in which the procedures could be improved.

The IO participated in the following meetings at the EIT premises in Budapest:

- 22 September 2014: The IO's individual Briefing Meeting,
- 29 September 2014, The Experts' Briefing Meeting,
- 29-30 October 2014: Consolidation and Ranking Meeting,
- 8 December 2014: presentation of the report to the EIT Director and the Chair of the Governing Board.

In the period between 5th November and 4th December, the IO interviewed members of the EIT staff and experts that participated in the evaluation exercise.

In the execution of his task, the IO focussed on the following aspects of the evaluation exercise:

- Scale and complexity of the evaluation task
- Transparency of the procedures
- Throughput time of the process and the efficiency of the procedures
- Efficiency, reliability and usability of the implementation of the procedures, including the IT-tools
- Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality
- Quality of the EIT evaluation process in comparison with the evaluation procedures of national and/or other international research funding schemes
- Quality of the evaluation process overall

The finding, conclusions and recommendations presented in the IO's report are based on the analysis of the documentation, the personal observations and impressions gained during the whole process, on the short interviews with EIT staff during the days after the consolidation and ranking meeting and on in-depth interviews with experts as well as on written input received from some experts.