




OBSERVER REPORT

Programme: Horizon 2020 Framework Programme
Call for proposals: H2020-S2RJU-2021
Call publication: 15 April 2021
Call deadline: 18 May 2021

Date of evaluation: between May 21, 2021 and June 4, 2021 (However the individual evaluation phase from 21 to 31 May, 2021, is not covered under the present report)

Observer

Name	Date	Signature
Joseph Prieur	June 9, 2021	

Number of pages in this report (title page included): 13 pages

1. Background

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

Call for proposals: H2020-S2RJU-2021

Opening date: 15 April 2021

Deadline: 18 May 2021

Budget : EUR 1.77 millions (S2R contribution)

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

Topic code & title	Type(s) of action	Number of eligible/ received proposals	Budget (estimated EU contribution)
S2R-OC-CCA-01-2021 R&I impact and benefits to make rail attractive for stakeholders	RIA	3/3	€ 170 000
S2R-OC-IP5-01-2021 Digital Automated Coupler innovation for the European Delivery Programme	CSA	2/2	€ 1 600 000
TOTAL		5/5	€ 1 770 000

The topic code in the above table refers to the Innovation Programme (IP) to which it belongs:

IP5: Technologies for sustainable and attractive European rail freight
CCA: Cross Cutting Themes and Activities

The call is of the Open Call (OC) category, open to both S2R JU members and non-members. The proposal submission is of the single-stage type for both topics.

Each topic has its own dedicated budget, and therefore the 2 topics are not competing against each other for the same budget. Although proposals may compete against each other within their topic budget line (depending on budget availability), in practice the budgets requested by the applicants were such that only one proposal above threshold (if any) would be funded for each topic.

The total estimated EU budget for the call is 1.77 million euros. In addition, beneficiaries who are S2R JU members (other than the Commission) are expected to provide in kind contributions in compliance with the provisions of their respective membership agreements

A total of 5 proposals (all eligible) were received with a total requested budget value amounting to 3.71 million euros. Overall, this is over twice as much as the available EU budget for the call. In detail, the available budget is 50% of the total requested funding for the CSA topic, and 33% of the total requested funding for the RIA topic.

All 5 proposals were evaluated by the same evaluation panel comprising 3 evaluators and 1 dedicated rapporteur.

The present report analyses the efficiency of the procedures, usability of the instruments (including IT tools), conduct and fairness of the evaluation process, and compliance with the applicable rules. The objective is to give independent advice for improving the evaluation processes for S2R JU calls.

The consensus phase of the evaluation, attended by the independent observer, was performed 100% remotely, in contrast with local consensus phases generally held in Brussels before the COVID outbreak.

The independent observer Joseph Prieur has been retired from ONERA, the French national aerospace lab, since June 2011. He was not involved at all with the call under evaluation. He has a wide experience of European Commission research framework programmes and proposal evaluations, first as END/SNE in DG RTD and DG GROW from 2001 to 2005, and, from 2006, as an independent expert (evaluator, rapporteur/recorder and observer), on several themes (Aeronautics, Surface Transport, Security, Space, Clean Sky JU, S2R JU, BBI JU, NMP, EIT, Metrology), in various places (primarily Brussels, but also Luxembourg, Budapest, Rotterdam, Monaco), for FP6, FP7 and Horizon 2020 programmes

2. Methodology

The approach followed by the observer was in line with the requirements of the S2R JU evaluation team and with the observer contract and its annex. All relevant information was made available to the observer in a timely manner.

The observer was involved in the evaluation process after the entry into force of his contract CT-EX2002B070194-150 on 27 May 2021 and was given access from that date to all documents and to the SEP system. The observer work consisted in the following activities:

- Review general and specific Horizon 2020 documents and relevant evaluation rules (https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/wp/2018-2020/annexes/h2020-wp1820-annex-ga_en.pdf) and H2020 Grants Manual - Section on Proposal submission and evaluation https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/pse/h2020-guide-pse_en.pdf
- Review current versions of strategic and operational S2R JU documents, namely:
 - The S2R Strategic Master Plan: providing a high-level strategic vision to achieve the S2R objectives and identifying key priority research areas (https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/wp/jtis/h2020-masterplan-shift2rail_en.pdf)
 - The S2R Multiannual Action Plan (MAAP) part B, providing a long-term investment plan, identifying projects, milestones and deliverables to achieve the Strategic Master Plan objectives https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/wp/jtis/h2020-maap-part-b-shift2rail_en.pdf.
 - The annual work plan and budget 2021 document https://shift2rail.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AWP_2021_amendment_1_final_202104.pdf containing, as Annex I, the 2 relevant topic descriptions for this call: specific challenge, scope, expected impact, and (for the RIA topic) complementarity with other activities and

a special participation condition of one single entity (justified by the very specific technical nature of the work with very little cooperation relevance).

- Review briefings and other relevant information provided to the experts/evaluators and the recorder by the S2R JU evaluation team.
- Attend a specific observer briefing via MS Teams on May 27, 2021.
- During the remote consensus phase, attend the overall general briefing to the experts on June 3, 2021, and then observe all consensus and ranking/panel meetings (on June 3 & 4, 2021) via MS Teams.
- Throughout the consensus phase preparation and the consensus phase itself (from 27 May to 04 June, 2021) have some exchanges by mail, phone, and/or MS Teams with the call coordinator, the head of Research & Innovation (acting also as Quality Controller for the evaluation), to clarify some details of the consensus process.
- Prepare the present report

The observer did not participate to the individual evaluation phase and therefore this phase will not be addressed in the present report.

3. Assessment

Scale of complexity of the evaluation task:

The evaluation task was rather simple as only 5 proposals were received and evaluated.

A single panel of 3 experts was selected for the evaluation of all 5 proposals, thus contributing to a good homogeneity and consistency of the evaluation. One additional expert was selected to act as a dedicated recorder to prepare all consensus reports.

In addition to the independent observer, other observers from relevant European institutions such as EC, ERA (European Railway Agency) were also present to ensure coordination of all rail activities at EU level and Programme level. These observers are not evaluating proposals but, in their coordination role, can assist evaluators.

The dedicated recorder (not involved as evaluator) had prepared and submitted to the S2R JU moderator a draft of the consensus reports ahead of the consensus meetings. These drafts displayed common views as well as possible diverging opinions between experts, thus providing a good basis to start an effective and efficient discussion on the proposal merits during consensus meetings. Useful tips to prepare good reports (for both IERs and CRs) were provided as part of the expert briefing delivered to the experts at the start of the individual evaluation phase.

The head of Research & Innovation of the S2R JU was involved as Quality Checker (QC) to review the CRs established at the end of consensus meetings and provide his feedback to the moderator. All CRs were finalized after one single iteration with QC. With only 5 proposals, the quality check was in no way a bottleneck in the evaluation process.

The observer is of the opinion that the S2R evaluation team was well prepared for the required tasks of this totally remote evaluation. All phases of the process (briefing, consensus

meetings, quality checks, proposal ranking and panel report meetings) and the roles of each participant were clear to all involved persons. The planning of the consensus phase (schedule of meetings) was communicated to all participants. It allowed for about 2-hour meetings, with a time interval of half an hour as buffer time between consecutive meetings, which is a wise precaution, considering that the actual duration of consensus meetings cannot be accurately predicted. With only 5 proposals to be evaluated and the flexibility displayed by all participants, the whole exercise was conducted in a smooth and efficient way.

Transparency of the procedures:

The procedures for the evaluation and selection of proposals were transparent to all participants including the sequencing of the process stages: individual evaluation, initial CR drafting, consensus, quality check, review and approval of CRs, and finally ranking of proposals and panel report preparation and approval.

The modalities of the evaluation were clearly explained in detailed briefings delivered to the experts at the start of both the individual evaluation and the consensus phases. The comprehensiveness of these briefings illustrates the willingness of the S2RJU staff to have a fully transparent evaluation process. During the consensus phase, the independent observer could raise any question at any time, and indeed all questions received prompt and adequate answers, which reflects also the full transparency of the process.

The independent observer was also provided with a copy of the early briefing delivered on 21 May 2021 at the start of the individual evaluation phase, which contains also useful recommendations, tips, and suggestions for evaluators on how to write high quality reports. This briefing was to a large extent repeated to the experts at the start of the consensus phase

The procedures are in line with the rules described in Annex H (evaluation rules) of all Horizon 2020 Work Programmes and they comply with the principles established by the Commission and reminded to experts during briefings (independence, impartiality, absence of conflicts of interest, objectivity, consistency, accuracy). Each aspect of the evaluation process is described in detail in the “Grants Manual: Section on proposal submission and evaluation” referred to in the S2R Annual Work Plans http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/pse/h2020-guide-pse_en.pdf available to all experts and to the independent observer

The evaluation criteria and sub criteria, scoring system and thresholds were well understood by all experts. The requirement of “commenting before scoring” was also clearly understood and strictly followed by all participants during the consensus discussions. Whenever necessary, experts were invited to refer to the score interpretation table, after the consensus comments had been agreed upon, in order to ensure that the given scores indeed reflected the agreed comments.

Specific arrangements due to the remote character of the consensus phase such as the lack of physical signature of the panel reports were clearly explained to the evaluators by the moderator: after approval of the CRs in SEP and review of the complete panel report, including the ranked list, all evaluators expressed verbally their agreement (via MS Teams) on the report and were then sent an e-mail requiring them to confirm in writing their agreement. This is to avoid sending around by mail the report itself which is a confidential document.

The observer is of the opinion that the remote character of the consensus phase (which has been practiced for more than one year, since the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic) does not adversely impact in any way the transparency nor the outcome of the evaluation process. He is fully convinced that the evaluation was conducted with high standards of transparency, fairness and diligence.

Throughput time of the evaluation and the efficiency of the procedures:

There were only 5 proposals to be evaluated. Experts were given 10 days (including 2 week-ends) to perform their individual evaluations, which is quite reasonable even for those experts who do have a job to perform over that period.

Once all IERs of a proposal are completed, the recorder can access them and start drafting an initial version of the CR which would then serve as a basis of the consensus discussions

Not only does the observer believe that having a dedicated recorder is a good practice in terms of efficiency of the evaluation process, but also it allows all evaluators to take fully part into the consensus debate without one of them having to concentrate on collating the opinions of his co-evaluators with the risk of not being in a good position to express/defend his own view, or the opposite risk of imposing his own views onto his fellow experts.

The recorder appeared to be very experienced, with good writing skills and able to capture the substance of the individual comments of the evaluators in order to formulate common views and diverging opinions, if any, to be addressed and resolved during the consensus meetings.

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

The IT evaluation tool SEP employed in the evaluation process is fully operational, and all participants were familiar with the system.

The MS Teams platform used in the remote consensus phase appeared also to be familiar to all participants, and there was no technical issue with the use of the system. All participants adhered perfectly to the recommendation to switch off their cameras almost permanently and their microphones whenever they did not want to speak, in order not to deteriorate the audio quality of the exchanges.

The observer believes the procedures used are reliable and robust and the implementation of these procedures was very good.

Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality of the evaluation:

From his attendance to the consensus phase, the observer is convinced that the evaluation was impartial, fair and conducted in full compliance with the rules set by the Commission, in accordance with specific S2R rules, and in line with the steps indicated in the “Grants Manual: Section on proposal submission and evaluation”. These rules and procedures were well known to all experts and were reminded to them as part of their briefings

The overall evaluation process is compliant with the principles established by the Commission: independence, impartiality, objectivity, accuracy and consistency.

The confidentiality requirements, which are annexed to the contracts of the experts and the observer, were reminded to the experts during briefings by the S2R JU staff involved in the evaluation. Likewise, the external observers are bound by the confidentiality requirements of the staff regulation.

The involvement of a rather large number of participants having well defined roles (3 experts/evaluators, the moderator, the dedicated recorder, the independent observer, other observers from EC or Agencies, and the quality controller) is believed to contribute significantly to achieve impartial and fair evaluations.

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

The “H2020 Vademecum section on proposal submission and evaluation” (<http://www.h2020.cz/files/pracna/H2020-Vademecum-Section-on-Proposal-Submission-and-Evaluation>) is a document meant to assist all staff in implementing proposal evaluation (from the Commission, the Executive Agencies or JUs). It provides a common basis for all personnel involved in the evaluation to have a similar approach in conducting the evaluation. The document is consistent with the rules and procedures given in the Grants Manual - Section on: Proposal submission and evaluation (http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/pse/h2020-guide-pse_en.pdf), and with briefings provided to the experts.

In addition, experts have been provided with a SEP User guide https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/support/expert/expert_evaluation_user_manual.pdf , as well as with very comprehensive and detailed briefings.

All the information and documents were in full conformity with existing applicable rules and the general annexes to the Horizon 2020 Work Programmes https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/wp/2018-2020/annexes/h2020-wp1820-annex-ga_en.pdf , especially Annex H which describes the evaluation rules

The observer is convinced that all phases of the H2020-S2RJU-2021 call evaluation were conducted in full compliance with the rules and guides contained in the above-mentioned documents.

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

The observer has not been involved in evaluation processes other than EU research ones. Based on his experience with the observation of many Horizon 2020 call evaluations, the observer believes that the EU evaluation process is robust and of high quality and, on the basis of earlier discussions with many experienced evaluators over different previous calls, can be considered better than or as good as other national and/or other international research funding schemes. It is generally acknowledged that several countries are looking to the EU process, or even transposing it, to improve their national process.

At international level, the main evaluation principles are objectivity and impartiality, independence of evaluators, participation of all parties concerned in the entire process, transparency and focus, reliability, completeness and clarity of reports, fairness and protection of the interests of the parties involved. The observer is convinced that all the above-mentioned

international principles are well embedded and efficiently implemented in the EU evaluation process.

Overall quality of the evaluation:

The overall quality of the evaluation process was excellent, thanks to the contribution of all involved parties (experts, recorder, various observers, and S2R JU staff)

The evaluators were selected primarily on the basis of their expertise. All were familiar with the Horizon 2020 programme as well as with the specificities of the S2R JU calls.

As all consensus meetings took place in sequence and not in parallel (a fortunate, but rare, situation), the independent observer was able to attend all 5 consensus meetings without any restriction whatsoever, and free to raise any question with the S2R JU evaluation staff at any stage of the evaluation process.

The S2R JU staff involved in the evaluation, showed full compliance with the established rules and procedures.

In conclusion, the whole evaluation process was conducted by all participants, with the highest professional and quality standards and in accordance with the applicable rules and guidelines. The observer is of the opinion that the evaluation was conducted in a fair, transparent and open way and that each proposal received adequate and equal treatment.

Other remarks

- quality of the documentation provided to experts beforehand

The independent observer was given access to the briefing material delivered to the experts at the start of the individual evaluation phase. This high quality and comprehensive briefing covered general information about S2R JU, specific aspects of the S2R JU call 2021 with its 2 topics (including some derogations to the standard rules, for example in terms of number of partners per proposal for RIAs), and extensive details about the evaluation process and procedures. All relevant aspects of the evaluation process were addressed: the timing, the evaluation criteria & sub criteria, the scoring system, the role of the different participants, the different phases (individual evaluation, consensus, panel), the confidentiality requirements, the Conflict-of-Interest situations, and all major principles of the process (impartiality, objectivity, accuracy, independence, consistency)

Also, very useful in this initial briefing, were extensive guidance, tips and recommendations concerning the write up of IERs and CRs for each criterion.

- quality of the remote consensus briefing

A new briefing was delivered to the experts on the morning of the first day of the consensus phase (June 3, 2021), explaining in detail the purpose, sequence, rules and content of the consensus and panel meetings, and the roles of each participant. Although the briefing repeats most of the information provided to the experts at the start of the individual evaluation phase, it does provide more focused and detailed practical information relevant for the consensus and panel stages. It also provides practical information to the experts about the payment.

- the understanding by experts of the call (context, topics), of the evaluation process and their role and of the award criteria and scoring scheme

The experts benefited from 2 very detailed briefings at the start of the individual and consensus evaluation phases. Further, all 3 evaluators and the recorder were very experienced experts very familiar with all aspects of S2R call evaluations

It was very clear and obvious that experts were all perfectly aware of and understanding the call context, the annual work plan 2021, the topics and action types (CSA and RIA), the OC (Open Call) types of proposals, the Innovation Programmes (IPs), and all relevant specific aspects of this call.

They were also very familiar with important issues such as admissibility/eligibility of proposals, Conflicts of Interest, their own roles, the evaluation methodology and process, and the award criteria and sub criteria.

Other important aspects clearly well understood by evaluators were the need to avoid penalizing twice (or rewarding twice) a proposal for the same reason under two different criteria, the need for “commenting before scoring”, the required consistency of the comments with the scores, and the need to pay attention to the wording of the consensus report in order to (1) avoid encouraging claims for redress and (2) ensure that applicants get an accurate, clear and fair feedback from the evaluation (the ESR).

- the allocation of experts to proposals: balance (gender, geographic, sector), relevance and balance of expertise, ...

Experts were, as expected, selected primarily on the basis of their expertise in relation to the topics. For this particular small call, the S2R JU had purposely decided to have a single evaluation panel composed only of experienced experts. It was clear from the consensus discussions that all 3 evaluators were perfectly suitable for evaluating proposals responding to the 2 topics of the call

For such a small panel, statistical considerations on gender balance, geographical balance, sector balance or nationalities are of little or no significance.

- the process of the individual evaluations and the actors involved

Not applicable in this report, as the independent observer was not involved in the individual evaluation phase

- the process of the consensus meetings and the actors involved

Consensus meetings were performed remotely, using MS Teams. The 5 meetings were performed in sequence and went smoothly over the 2 days of the consensus phase. The workload and the pace of the consensus phase were very reasonable and there was no need to rush the process.

As there was one single panel for all proposals, all consensus meetings were conducted with good homogeneity and coherence over the whole process. The work sharing between the moderator and the recorder was well balanced: the S2R JU moderator was relatively new, but his reduced pro-activity was adequately complemented by a very experienced recorder who was able to pro-actively and smoothly lead the meetings. The observer believes that the complementarity and flexibility within the tandem formed by the moderator and the recorder are key for the success of the consensus meetings.

In all cases, the recorder refrained from expressing his views on the proposals and from suggesting scores. However, the observer noted one situation when both external observers expressed some views and judgements on the quality of the proposal being discussed. The recorder was prompt to react and to invite the 3 evaluators to express their own views, and not simply take observers remarks, thus reminding all participants that it is up to the designated evaluators, and nobody else, to contribute to the CR.

The observer noted, at the start of each consensus meeting and for each evaluation criterion, the recorder invited each evaluator to express his views before displaying the initial draft CR. This is very positive: in this way, evaluators are not distracted and therefore not influenced by the CR text and therefore they are free to express their own views, rather than reacting to an existing text. Only after this tour de table the recorder displays his draft CR and the discussion between experts can continue. As a possible small improvement of this positive process, it might be useful not to always let the same expert be the first speaker in the tour de table: indeed, the observer noted that the second and third speakers tend to express their position (agree/disagree) with respect to the views of the first speaker, rather than expressing fully their own original views. In other words, the influence of the first speaker on his co-evaluators, consciously or unconsciously, is such that the first speaker should not always be the same expert: some rotation should be introduced.

There was sufficient flexibility in the meeting schedule to allow discussions to take sometimes longer than planned, without any detrimental effect on the planning.

The recorder was careful to finalise the discussion on any criterion before inviting evaluators to agree on a score. Likewise, he was careful to finalise comments and scores on any criterion before addressing the next criterion.

- criteria and scoring scheme: appropriateness, completeness, relevance, clarity, consistency in application, ...

The applicable 3 main criteria and sub-criteria for each action type (RIA or CSA) were explained in detail to the experts during the briefings. They constitute a simple and robust evaluation system which all stakeholders (evaluators as well as applicants) are used to work with. The 3 criteria are rather independent from each other and do not overlap, thus minimizing the occurrence of situations where comments could apply to 2 different criteria.

All evaluators were familiar with the scoring system, and the significance of thresholds. The score interpretation table was displayed, as a reminder, when necessary, before scoring against the agreed comments. Negative comments were qualified in terms of severity using the adequate wording of the scoring table (minor or major shortcoming, weakness, etc.). This is helpful to ensure that scores indeed reflect the comments.

- final panel meeting and the actors involved

Each topic had its own budget. Therefore, there was a panel meeting for each topic. In order not to disrupt the momentum of the consensus meetings, it was decided to have both panels at the end of the second day after completing all consensus meetings. For both panels (CSA and RIA), the meeting was a rather straightforward formality. As all proposals were evaluated by the same 3 experts, harmonisation and consistency were automatically ensured throughout the whole evaluation exercise. Coherence between scores and comments was also ensured at the quality check stage. In addition, there was no situation of equal score between proposals above thresholds. As a result, the panel reports could be drafted ahead of the meetings, and submitted by the moderator to the experts who did not have any comment. They all agreed on the proposed ranking of proposals, and the approved CRs were appended to the reports.

Due to the remote nature of the consensus phase and the need not to send out the panel reports (for confidentiality reasons), the moderator asked the evaluators to agree verbally on the ranking lists and on the panel reports; then an e-mail was sent to evaluators, inviting them to confirm their agreement in writing, by return mail.

- occurrence and handling of specific issues (if any) such as conflicts of interest

Conflicts of interest (CoI) situations, if any, were resolved at an early stage in the evaluation process, immediately after receipt of the proposals, in parallel with the eligibility check, once the applicants are known. There was no CoI situation detected during the consensus phase.

- quality of evaluation summary reports

All participants were made aware from the start of the process of the importance of producing high quality CRs (which eventually become ESRs) in order to ensure a clear, fair and useful return to the applicants and avoid generating complaints and/or redress procedures

At the consensus stage the use of an experienced dedicated recorder with good writing skills and the involvement of a quality checker did ensure a good quality of the CRs and eventually of the evaluation summary reports.

- overall conduct of staff: responsiveness, hospitality, competence, ...

Throughout the evaluation period attended by the observer, the professionalism and support of all S2R staff involved in the evaluation were outstanding. All S2R staff participants (call coordinator, moderator, quality checker) responded to questions and remarks from the observer in a prompt and efficient manner, thus demonstrating a high degree of openness and transparency.

- infrastructure and working conditions for evaluators

During the consensus phase of this evaluation the infrastructure and working conditions for the evaluators were the same as the individual phase conditions, i.e. their home conditions due to the remote character of this evaluation.

- workload and time given to evaluators for their work

The observer is of the opinion that the allocated period to perform individual remote evaluation (21 May – 31 May, 2021) was more than sufficient for all experts and all proposals, even for those experts who do have a job. The same applies for the 2-day consensus phase: there was ample time for briefings, consensus meetings, quality checks and final panel meetings.

- remuneration of evaluators (in relation to workload)

The observer did not note or hear any specific comment about the remuneration in relation to the workload for this particular S2R JU call 2021.

4. Recommendations/suggestions

The evaluation of this mini call came at the very end of the Horizon 2020 programme, when the evaluation system has been extensively used, polished and well proven over a seven-year period. As a result, and not surprisingly, there is not much which can be said in terms of very novel recommendations. Some of the listed ones hereunder are rather confirmation of good practices noted in this call and earlier call evaluations which may possibly prove useful for the next programme Horizon Europe, once it is up and running.

- the concept of a dedicated rapporteur (or recorder) with good writing skills is to be continued as it contributes to the quality and the efficiency of the evaluation. It also puts all evaluators on an equal position, as none of them has the burden to prepare a CR.
- The provision of guidance, tips and recommendations in the initial briefing to the evaluators, concerning the drafting and wording of the reports, both in terms of content and size, is a very good practice, especially for first time evaluators
- It might be useful to consider inviting experts within a panel to follow a preferred ordering of the proposals for conducting their individual evaluation and preparation of IERs. This may help spreading the workload of the recorder more evenly over the individual evaluation period rather than concentrating this workload at the very end of the period.
- The practice of an initial quick “tour de table” among experts at the start of the discussion in the consensus meeting of a new proposal (or a new criterion within a consensus meeting), before the draft CR is displayed to the experts, is a very good practice. It would be advisable to ensure some rotation between experts to avoid that it is always the same expert who speaks first.
- The involvement of a dedicated “quality checker” for ensuring quality, homogeneity and coherence in the reports is a very good practice. It does contribute to provide a fair, clear, accurate, properly written and therefore useful feed-back to the applicant and to avoid unnecessary possible claims.
- A good complementarity within the tandem formed by the recorder and the moderator is key to the successful running of consensus meetings. There is sufficient flexibility

in the practical and operational respective roles of the 2 actors of this tandem to allow them to support each other and share the work in a smooth and efficient manner, as they see fit.

- Whenever external observers attend consensus meetings, their role should be clear and sufficiently detailed to ensure that they are not acting as additional evaluators
- If fully remote evaluations are to become increasingly frequent in the future programme Horizon Europe, it may be useful for experts who may never meet and have face to face discussions, to send a short résumé (no more than 5 to 10 lines, typically) which would be distributed to all members of their panel, ahead of the evaluation, in such a way that each of them has an immediate and quick overview of the specific background of his fellow experts.

In closing, the observer would like to express his view that the evaluation process was conducted thoroughly and very professionally by all participants throughout the complete consensus phase of the process. The observer is convinced that all proposals received adequate, fair and equal treatment. The outcome of the exercise is a set of ranked lists of projects where the very best ones have been identified and will be funded within the budget limits.

The observer would also like to thank the staff of the S2R JU involved in the evaluation process, especially the head of Research & Innovation Giorgio Travaini, the call coordinator Neil Griffin and moderator Manuel Alarcon Espinosa for their transparency, openness and support throughout the whole period. The welcoming address of the S2R JU Executive Director Carlo Borghini was also appreciated.

Jo Prieur

Independent Observer

