



OBSERVER REPORT

Programme: Horizon 2020 Framework Programme

Call for proposal: H2020-S2RJU-2018-01

Published: 11 January 2018

Opening date: 16 January 2018

Deadline: 24 April 2018

Date of evaluation: Between June 4 and June 7, 2018

Observer:

Name		
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Number of pages in this report (title page included): 14

1. Background

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

Call for proposal: H2020-S2RJU-2018-01

Published: 11 January 2018

Opening date: 16 January 2018

Deadline: 24 April 2018

Budget: 78.730.000 EUR

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

Topic code	Panel	Type of action	Budget	Number of proposals
S2R-CFM-CCA-01-2018	CFMX - RIA	Shift2Rail-RIA-LS Research and Innovation Action Lump-Sum	842,000	1
S2R-CFM-IP1-01-2018	CFMX - RIA	Shift2Rail-RIA-LS Research and Innovation Action Lump-Sum	12,680,600	1
S2R-CFM-IP1-02-2018	CFMX - RIA	Shift2Rail-RIA-LS Research and Innovation Action Lump-Sum	4,700,000	1
S2R-CFM-IP2-01-2018	CFMX - IA	Shift2Rail-IA-LS Innovation Action Lump-Sum	17,287,400	1
S2R-CFM-IP3-01-2018	CFMX - IA	Shift2Rail-IA-LS Innovation Action Lump-Sum	13,400,000	1
S2R-CFM-IP4-01-2018	CFMX - IA	Shift2Rail-IA-LS Innovation Action Lump-Sum	5,200,000	1
S2R-CFM-IP5-01-2018	CFMX - IA	Shift2Rail-IA-LS Innovation Action Lump-Sum	5,500,000	1
S2R-OC-IP1-01-2018	COMM	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	4,000,000	2
S2R-OC-IP2-01-2018	SIGN	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	1,300,000	4
S2R-OC-IP2-02-2018	SIGN	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	1,020,000	3
S2R-OC-IP2-03-2018	COMM	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	750,000	4
S2R-OC-IP3-01-2018	ASSETS - IA	Shift2Rail-IA Innovation action	4,750,000	4
S2R-OC-IP4-01-2018	ASSETS - RIA	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	2,000,000	2
S2R-OC-IP4-02-2018	TRANSP - RIA	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	1,500,000	1
S2R-OC-IP5-01-2018	COMM	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	600,000	1
S2R-OC-IPX-01-2018	CFMX - RIA	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	2,200,000	6

S2R-OC-IPX-02-2018	TRANSP - CSA	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	500,000	1
S2R-OC-IPX-03-2018	TRANSP - CSA	Shift2Rail-RIA Research and Innovation action	500,000	4

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

IP 1: Cost-efficient and reliable trains

IP 2: Advanced traffic management and control systems

IP 3: Cost efficient and Reliable High Capacity Infrastructure

IP 4: IT Solutions for Attractive Railway Services

IP5: Technologies for sustainable and attractive European rail freight

CCA: Cross Cutting Activities

The topic code also refers to the topic category. There are 2 categories of topics:

- Those identified as CFM (call for members) are restricted to S2R JU members only and the work programme clearly specifies that only one proposal per topic will be funded within this category

- Those identified as OC (Open Call) are open to non S2R JU members only and depending on budget availability more than one project may be funded.

It is noted that each of the 18 topics has its own dedicated EU budget line and therefore topics are not competing against each other for the same budget.

A total of **39 proposals** were received. They were distributed over 5 evaluation panels:

- CFMX (13 eligible proposals, 7 CFMs, 6 in response to OC),
- SIGN (7 eligible proposals, all in response to OC),
- COMM (7 eligible proposals, all in response to OC),
- TRANSP (6 eligible proposals, all in response to OC),
- ASSETS (6 eligible proposals, all in response to OC)

Scope of the observer report

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 Commission funding.

2. Methodology

The approach followed by the observer was in line with the requirements of the H2020 Grants Manual. All relevant information was made available to the observer in a timely manner: briefings, some exchange of mails between the S2R team and the experts, specific information regarding the evaluation procedure (such as databases highlighting the allocation of proposals to experts and their subsequent allocation in panels). The information provided by S2R to the observer was extensive, accurate and useful.

Ahead of the observation process carried by the observer (remotely and in situ), he had the opportunity to review a number of documents that were essential to carry out an independent and efficient observation:

- General and specific Horizon 2020 documents and relevant evaluation rules (http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/wp/2016-2017/annexes/h2020-wp1617-annex-ga_en.pdf)
- H2020 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
- Strategic S2R documents, namely:
 - The S2R Master Plan: providing a high-level strategic vision to achieve the S2R objectives and identifies key priority research areas (<http://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/rail/doc/2015-03-31-decisionn4-2015-adoption-s2r-masterplan.pdf>)
 - The S2R Multiannual Action Plan (MAAP) providing a long-term investment plan, identifying projects, milestones and deliverables to achieve the Master Plan objectives. It is a useful document to understand the programmatic/global view on the Innovation Programme (http://www.shift2rail.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/S2R-JU-GB_Decision-N-15-2015-MAAP.pdf)
 - The Annual Work Plan 2018 (http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/wp/jtis/h2020-wp18-shift2rail_en.pdf)

The observation-process consisted of two different phases:

A. Specific actions feeding into the online observation of this call include:

- On March 22nd the S2R team established contact with the experts in order to provide them with the necessary tools and knowledge to carry out the evaluation. Experts were informed about the timing of the evaluation sessions, call topic, and also about different deadlines: both for the Individual Evaluation Sessions (IES) and for the Draft Consensus Reports. Experts also received “standard briefing slides”, “FAQ for experts”, “experts’ recommendations” and useful information about Brussels logistics.
- Experts were asked to confirm (in accordance with Section IV.1 of the H2020 Grants Manual) the absence of conflicts of interests between themselves and the proposed calls.

- S2R also shared its **briefing for evaluators**. Such briefing outlined the specific challenge of the evaluation and the following instructions concerning the methodology to be used by experts in the evaluation process:
 - 1 The scoring system
 - 2 The standard criteria to be applied to the evaluation (based in the excellency, impact, quality and efficiency of the proposals).
 - 3 Experts were suggested a to follow a formulation-text for their evaluation.
- All experts submitted their individual evaluations on time. Recorders therefore had enough time to conclude their consensus reports before the beginning of the evaluation session.

B. Specific actions feeding into the onsite observation of this call include:

The evaluation session began at 10:00 on June 4 at the European Commission (Covent Garden Building). Following the experts' registration, staff from S2R welcomed experts and reminded them about:

- General information regarding S2R
- Specific information regarding the evaluation (such as the way panels were going to work, how they were going to be allocated, evaluating methods such as the grading system, etcetera)
- Information regarding the role of the recorders.
- Information regarding the role of moderators.
- Information about the observer's role in the evaluation. More specifically, they were asked by the S2R staff to contact the observer in order to cooperate with him and to provide him any information that could be useful for improving future evaluations.

Representatives of the Research Executive Agency gave experts a briefing on reimbursements, security measures and other technicalities.

It must be highlighted that this information had previously been given to all experts. Nonetheless, this introduction seemed especially useful for those experts who had not participated in evaluations at the Research Executive Agency before.

Discussion on the proposals

Experts were distributed in five different panels. These panels worked from Monday 4 June until Thursday 7 of June.

Each group had an assigned "recorder" and a representative from S2R who acted as "moderator". Recorders shared their "Consensus Reports" with the experts. Moreover, a financial expert attended the CFMX panel (novelty due to the CFM lump sum pilot project) and there were also representatives of the European Commission and the European railway Agency who attended the panels as observers.

Individual discussions of each of the 39 eligible proposals took place in all panels. Under the leadership of the experts and the assistance of recorders and the S2R moderators, all consensus groups discussed each proposal and arrived to a conclusion about the quality of every one of them. The methodology used to assess the quality of the proposals respected at all times the instructions provided by S2R fully respecting the European Commission methods stressed in its rules of procedure mentioned above.

The independent observer attended experts' briefing sessions, as well as all panel meetings. The observer moved from one panel to another throughout the whole evaluation and, in addition to this, held individual meetings with experts and recorders from every single panel.

To ensure privacy and transparency these meetings were held privately (without staff from S2R present) in an office that was provided to the observer. Therefore, experts had the chance to express their views about the evaluation and the treatment received from the S2R staff privately.

From the beginning till the end of the process, the observer had the full support of the S2R staff. Thanks to this help, the observation was done in a transparent manner.

3. Assessment

Scale of complexity of the evaluation task:

In terms of number of proposals to be evaluated the task was relatively complex, as 39 eligible proposals were received and the complexity of the topics made the discussions between experts technical and lengthy. However, the observer found that the S2R team involved in the evaluation was well prepared to meet the scale and complexity of the tasks and therefore the evaluation was carried out without any significant problem. Furthermore, the high quality of the experts helped the S2R staff to conclude all evaluations in due time.

Each proposal was evaluated by 3 to 6 experts. An additional person was selected ahead of the joint evaluation phase to act as a recorder to prepare the consensus report. In all the panels, he/she was a dedicated recorder not involved in the evaluation itself. Recorders had prepared a draft of the consensus reports before the local evaluation phase in Brussels. Since clear instructions on how to prepare consensus reports were given in advance, most of them were correctly drafted ahead of the meeting.

Only one expert had to move panel due to declared COI from the initially selected experts

This certainly made the evaluation less complex for experts than in previous evaluations where some of them had participated. Experts were also given a working space where they could stay during the time when discussions of proposals in which they did not participate were taking place.

A series of conclusions can be highlighted from this:

1. Thanks to the fact that “recorders” never acted as “experts” (as it has been the case in previous occasions with rapporteurs) discussions moved smoothly throughout the whole process, allowing experts to discuss the proposals while recorders could focus in drafting the ideas and contributions shared by experts.
2. In a few occasions, recorders intended to share their opinion regarding the content of the discussions. This forced moderators from S2R to remind them about their role in the evaluation.
3. When recorders did not have any knowledge of the issues being discussed, their work was better accomplished than in the cases where they did know about matters related to the evaluation.
4. Moderators from S2R did an excellent job helping experts in case they had any doubts regarding the evaluation system and making sure that recorders fulfilled their specific role.

Transparency of the procedures:

The procedures were transparent at every stage of the evaluation. The S2R staff was willing to provide any relevant information - both to the independent experts and to the independent observer - at all times. Thanks to this level of transparency, it was possible to assess the quality of the evaluation, the commitment of the independent experts and their support to the evaluation itself.

The main phases of the evaluation process (individual evaluations, consensus meetings, panel meetings and proposal ranking) and the roles of each of the participants (moderators, evaluators, recorders and observer) were clearly defined. Planning of the evaluation i.e. team composition, room allocation and schedule of meetings, was also sound and clearly communicated to all participants.

The evaluation criteria, scoring system and thresholds applied were well understood by all experts. Score interpretation tables were clearly displayed in every consensus meeting room.

Experts were repeatedly informed about transparency requirements during briefings and also during consensus meetings. Requirements regarding possible conflicts of interest were specifically highlighted and accepted by all experts and recorders.

The observer is fully convinced that the evaluation was conducted with the highest standards of transparency, fairness and diligence at all stages.

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

The throughput time of the evaluation was the one expected by S2R. Most panels had time to conclude their evaluations within the timeframes expected ahead of the evaluation. Only one panel needed to stay for half a day longer than expected in order to conclude its evaluations correctly. This was absolutely necessary, especially considering that this panel had intensively worked during the time previously scheduled.

Disparities regarding the amount of proposals to be evaluated per each panel created a logic situation: different panels needed more or less time to evaluate their proposals depending on the number of bids they had to evaluate.

The evaluation was especially successful in the sense that moderators handled debates amongst independent experts very efficiently. Lengthily discussions in which experts try to defend their positions instead of finding an agreement did not take place, as it tends to be the case in other evaluations. This should also be thanked to the fact that experts showed a high level of professionalism and proved to know well what their goal was in the context of the evaluation.

To conclude, the observer would like to highlight that all the procedures stated in the rules of procedure (mentioned above) were efficiently handled by S2R.

Furthermore, recommendations given to this team in the past were implemented in this evaluation. For instance, experts who had participated in previous evaluations at S2R stressed that in this occasion the information they had received on how to proceed during panel discussions was even clearer than in 2017.

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

All procedures and tools were managed efficiently and reliably by the experts, the rapporteurs and the S2R staff.

The IT evaluation tool SEP was employed in the evaluation process. The tool is fully operational and all experts have become familiar with the system.

Experts who had not worked with SEP before also stressed that the system seemed easy to understand and did not have any problems with it.

Impartiality, fairness and confidentiality of the evaluation:

The evaluation was conducted in an impartial manner. The group of independent experts fully respected the Section IV.2 of the Grants Manual. Experts showed a high level of skill, experience and impartiality.

Each expert provided his or her opinion freely and moderators gave support to the group of experts guiding them, when necessary, during drafting the consensus reports.

The Award Criteria (scoring method) was entirely based in the grading system provided by the European Commission (From 0 to 5 according to the level of the proposals). The award criteria was shared with experts and recorders prior to the individual evaluations, explained again during the introductory meeting and, furthermore, it was visible in all the rooms where discussions were held. S2R moderators reminded experts, when needed, about the scoring system.

Independent and Consensus Reports were treated with confidentiality by S2R and also by the Independent Experts.

Gender balance was not achieved: a majority of experts were male. However, female experts stressed their understanding with regard to this situation. Moreover, they pointed out that taking into consideration the topic of the evaluation the rate of women was optimal.

Geographical diversity was achieved.

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

The evaluation was entirely based on the applicable rules. All parts of the evaluation set in the Grants Manual were followed. More specifically, all rules stated in the following documents were strictly followed:

- 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)
- SEP User guide (https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/support/expert/expert_evaluation_user_manual.Pdf)
- Horizon 2020 Work Programme (http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/wp/2016-2017/annexes/h2020-wp1617-annex-ga_en.pdf)

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

The evaluation process showed a larger degree of transparency in comparison with evaluations undertaken by Member States (as stated by a number of experts). The presence of an independent observer in the evaluation process is seen as good practice process. Outside the European Commission this role does not always exist but according to independent experts it warrants the quality of the evaluation process.

The S2R team managed to make a number of minor improvements in comparison with the already successful 2017 evaluation.

Overall quality of the evaluation:

Considering the level of transparency during the evaluation, the professionalism shown by the experts, rapporteurs and S2R staff, the observer believes that the overall quality of the evaluation was **extremely high**.

Independent experts discussed all proposals with professionalism. Each proposal received the same level of attention by experts regardless of whether they considered it good or bad. Furthermore, each grade agreed by the experts was discussed sufficiently and transparently without any external concerns. The methods used during this evaluation guaranteed a fair evaluation **uniquely based in the quality of the proposals**.

Other remarks:

Quality of the documentation provided to experts beforehand:

The documentation provided to the experts and to the observer beforehand was sufficient. It was also delivered with enough time to study it and to make a good use of it.

Quality of the on-site briefing sessions:

As mentioned above, experts received an opening on-site briefing session with all kinds of useful information (regarding the Joint Undertaking, the evaluation, procedures, payment issues, security measures, etc). This briefing session was well structured and useful to all experts, recorders and to the observer.

The evaluation process, in general, was well understood by the experts and by recorders. It was noted that recorders with higher skills in the English language managed to draft consensus reports better than those whom, for instance, were not English native speakers.

The role of moderators was crucial. This was especially the case in the CFMX panel, where a large number of proposals were discussed and where deliberations took place during 4 days. Their support, together with their encouragement, was essential in order to conclude all evaluations in due time.

Transparency and professionalism of recorders was high in all panels. Nevertheless, in a number of occasions recorders had to be reminded by moderators about the fact that they were not supposed to give their opinion on the score of the proposals.

Each proposal was discussed with the highest standards.

Understanding of the award criteria:

Thanks to the repeated instructions regarding this issue and to the constant assistance of the S2R staff, the understanding of the award criteria by all independent experts was optimal.

A number of experts stressed that a difference between a 0 and a 0,5 grading could be too sensitive. A solution would be to provide the possibility of adding grades of 0,25 to the existing scale.

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

The level of expertise of all experts was high. They all seemed to know very well the call and the topics they were discussing. All experts had a good understanding of what was expected from them. Whenever a technical doubt could come up regarding evaluation procedures, moderators from S2R were always available to make clarifications.

Experts came from different sectors. This was positive as it allowed proposals to be evaluated from different angles.

Geographically, the allocation of experts was well balanced.

In terms of gender balance, the observer noticed a majority of men over women. However, as previously pointed out, female experts appreciated the fact that in this specific sector it is very complicated to achieve a higher level of gender balance.

The process of the individual evaluations and the actors involved

Individual evaluations were done on time. This was also the case with the consensus reports.

All experts indicated that the time they had been given to conclude their evaluations was sufficient.

However, a number of them highlighted that the maximum amount of time they were allowed to bill the Commission for their services did not do justice to the real time they had spent working in the proposals. This opinion was presented by experts with less experience working in evaluations.

The process of the consensus meetings and the actors involved

Consensus meetings were held similarly in all panels. It is clear that a common system was agreed by moderators ahead of the meeting. This led to homogeneous discussions over the whole process.

The role of the recorder in consensus meetings has proved to be extremely important.

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

The 3 criteria used were understood and respected by all evaluators. They are rather independent from each other, they do not overlap and therefore the number of situations where comments could apply to 2 different criteria was thus minimized and hence it makes it easier for evaluators not to penalize (or reward) twice a proposal for the same negative (or positive) comment.

There were no specific difficulties expressed by evaluators in understanding the scoring system, the significance of thresholds, the need of “commenting before scoring”, or the need to have scores matching the comments.

The score interpretation table was displayed in every panel meeting room and extensively looked at by evaluators when it came to grading a proposal against a set of comments.

A number of experts stressed that it may be effective to break down three scores in more categories, which would probably make it easier to assess and ensure that each criteria is assessed in better detail. e.g. split Impact into Dissemination, Exploitation etc.

Final panel meeting and the actors involved

Each panel had a final panel meeting where conclusions achieved during the evaluation were reviewed by experts and recorders. This proved to be a useful exercise as it led to discussions where experts had the opportunity to re-phrase their views and make minor changes.

Hearings (if any) and the actors involved

Not applicable

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

No conflicts of interest took place during the evaluation. No specific issues had to be handled.

Quality of evaluation summary reports

In terms of content, the quality of the evaluation summary reports was – as stressed by all experts – very high.

After being drafted by each panel, summary reports were checked by members of S2R to ensure their quality, which guaranteed high quality evaluations from every panel.

Overall conduct of staff: responsiveness, hospitality, competence, ...

The conduct of the staff was excellent. The disposition of the S2R team as well as its motivation were assets that both the independent observer and the experts truly appreciated.

The observer would like to highlight the degree of professionalism shown by each member of the S2R team. Whenever any expert, recorder or the observer himself had any doubt or needed anything from the S2R team their response was immediate and of high quality.

The team spirit shown by the S2R staff during this evaluation was outstanding.

Infrastructure and working conditions for evaluators

The conditions at the Covent Garden building were very good. IT tools, canteen and other facilities worked correctly.

Workload and time given to evaluators for their work, (remotely and/or on-site, as applicable)

According to the independent experts and rapporteurs, the time they had to prepare independent and consensus reports was sufficient.

Remuneration of evaluators (in relation to workload)

A number of experts expressed that their remuneration was insufficient due to the workload that drafting each evaluation represented. As mentioned above, some experts expressed that evaluating a proposal in the time they were given was difficult and believed that they should have been given more time (and hence remuneration) for each evaluation.

4. Recommendations

1. Printing all the proposals and having them available at the meetings was useful for some experts. However, it was noticed that printing such an amount of paper was not environmentally friendly and in the future it could be avoided.
2. Regarding the award criteria, the observer noticed that experts would feel more comfortable providing more specific grades. Some of them stressed that a difference between a 4 and a 4,5 (for example) could be sensitive and hence a solution would be to provide the possibility of adding grades of 0,25 to the existing scale.

3. Experts who had participated in previous evaluations made the whole process smoother than experts without experience in evaluations at the Commission. Although it is understandable that new experts have to be welcomed in every evaluation, the observer believes that these should never account for more than 40%.

4. It may be effective to break down three scores in more categories, which would probably make it easier to assess and ensure that each criteria is assessed in better detail. e.g. split Impact into Dissemination, Exploitation etc. This could be a long-term goal that should be studied by the European Commission.

5. Recorders should continue being independent from the evaluation. It was noted that the system applied by S2R regarding this issue worked a lot more effectively than in those evaluations where rapporteurs acted both as experts and recorders simultaneously.

To conclude, the observer would like to stress that the transparency and professionalism shown throughout the whole evaluation allowed an excellent assessment of each proposal. The outstanding work done by S2R and the independent experts has certainly allowed each proposal to be treated fairly and carefully.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping, stylized strokes that form a complex, cursive-like pattern.

Diego Spottorno Vergara

Observer