



Evaluation of the 2015 JPco-fuND call: Survey of call applicants

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*“Monitoring of the projects in relation to overall JPND goals and objectives”***

Introduction

The Joint Programme for Neurodegenerative Disease Research (JPND) is the largest global research initiative aimed at tackling the challenge of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. With 30 member countries, JPND is strengthening coordination and collaboration in neurodegenerative disease research around the world to more rapidly find causes, develop cures and identify better ways to care for people with neurodegenerative diseases.

In 2015, JPND launched a five-year cohesive action with the European Commission called JPco-fuND, which included a joint trans-national call for research proposals addressing three priority areas: risk and protective factors, longitudinal cohort approaches and advanced experimental models.

There were 175 pre-proposals submitted to the first step of the two-step call, and 55 (31%) of them were invited to submit full proposals. These proposals were assessed by international reviewers, and a panel subsequently compiled a final ranking list. Based on scientific excellence and budget availability, 21 projects (38% of full proposals and 12% of all initially submitted pre-proposals) were selected by the national funding organisations for support. They comprise 124 research partners and are funded for a total amount of 36 million euros.

In order to enhance its activities and make more rapid progress toward its overall aims, JPND carefully monitors and assesses its initiatives, including calls for research proposals. With the aim of assessing *participant* satisfaction with the 2015 JPco-fuND call, a survey was developed by ZonMw (Netherlands) and MIUR (Italy) and, in March and April 2016, sent to the project coordinators of all **175** submitted proposals. Responses were compiled, analysed and condensed into a series of conclusions that will be used to inform and improve future calls.

Survey Highlights

A. Response rate

In total, 52% (91 of the 175 applicants) answered the questionnaire, and among these, 72 applicants (41%) completed it in full. The coordinators of funded projects were more likely than the coordinators of non-funded projects to complete the questionnaire in full (90% versus 32%).

The response rate compares favourably with the response rates of other known online surveys. For example, a JPI Urban Europe survey of both funded and non-funded project coordinators in 2015 had a final response rate for non-funded projects of 15%. Moreover, the survey response rate is in line with expected and acceptable response rates for online surveys described in the literature¹.

B. Call communication and text

The majority of respondents (53%) found information about the 2015 JPco-fuND call on the JPND website. Twenty-one percent said that they learned about it through the newsletter and/or

¹ See <https://www.uaf.edu/files/uafgov/fsadmin-nulty5-19-10.pdf>; https://facultyinnovate.utexas.edu/sites/default/files/response_rates.pdf

dissemination event, 20% via a project partner or project coordinator and 16% through other sources, such as colleague researchers or their university research office (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Information source regarding the launch of the 2015 JPco-fuND call



Overall, the respondents were very positive about the communication of the call (79% reported that they were satisfied and 20% unsure) and the clarity of the call text (79% were satisfied and 21% were unsure).

C. Evaluation of the project proposals

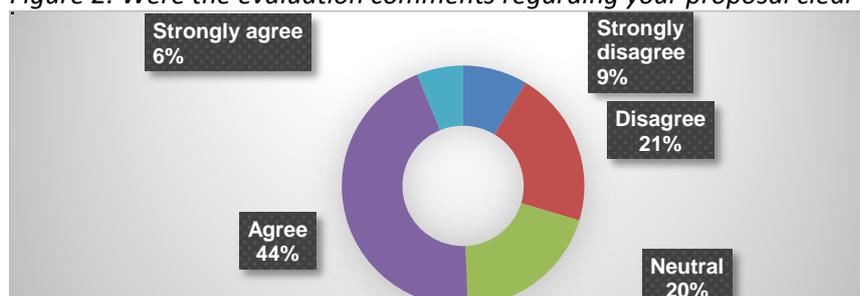
Evaluation criteria

Participants were asked to assess the different criteria used for the evaluation of project proposals. *Scientific value*, *innovative value* and *expected outcome* were determined to be highly relevant evaluation criteria by the respondents, while *societal value*, *practical value*, *public value* and *competitive value* were generally found to be of medium-to-high relevance. *Economic value* was found by most of the respondents to be of medium relevance. Respondents also suggested the introduction of additional evaluation criteria, including *excellence of the network*, *applicability*, *feasibility*, *patient value*, *translational outcome*, *innovation*, and *complementarity of work packages*. In addition, it was recommended that consideration should be made for young researchers or new research groups with high training potential.

Process and results

The respondents were more divided regarding the selection process, with 32% satisfied with the process and 31% percent unsatisfied. Thirty-seven percent were unsure. With regard to the quality of feedback received, 50% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that the evaluation comments for their proposal were clear and adequate. Almost 30% of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree to this statement, while 20% were neutral (Fig. 2). Less than a quarter of respondents (24%) were satisfied with the 12% success rate, and 43% reported that they were unsatisfied. Thirty-three percent said they were unsure.

Figure 2: Were the evaluation comments regarding your proposal clear and adequate?



Since about three-quarters of survey respondents were not selected for funding, less satisfaction with the selection process and results was not entirely unexpected. Nonetheless, these survey results – and the many valuable suggestions respondents offered for consideration – point to several important areas in which JPND can strive to improve in future calls. For example, some respondents said that the scientific assessment and decision process could be made more clear and transparent. Other recommendations submitted by respondents included the implementation of a rebuttal procedure as part of the review process (particularly when reviews are contradictory), a refined conflict-of-interest policy with regard to the evaluation of the proposals and the creation of new collaborations with other relevant programmes (for example, IMI or AGING). JPND appreciates these suggestions and will take them into consideration in the process of shaping upcoming calls.

D. Future calls

The survey asked respondents for feedback on the type of call instrument they think would advance three different priorities: collaborative research, the combining of research activities and transdisciplinary research. Overall, given the option of a project duration of 1-3 years or 1-4 years, respondents largely preferred a **duration of 1-4 years** for all three priorities. They also showed a strong preference for **two-step calls** over one-step calls. **Open** and **targeted calls for all levels of research** were both rated as the most relevant for collaborative research between scientists and stakeholders and for transdisciplinary research. For combining research activities, **targeted calls with all levels of research** and **targeted calls with two or more scientific topics** were preferred.

Conclusions

1. The survey response rate – which represented both funded projects (about one-quarter of respondents) and non-funded projects (about three-quarters of respondents) – was favourable compared with other similar surveys and can lend insight into where JPND excelled and where there is room for improvement in future calls.
2. Applicants were satisfied with the information they received about the call and their communication with JPND during the application process. JPND should continue to strive to deliver timely support and clarification through the Joint Call Secretariat and Communications team.
3. Respondents found *scientific value*, *innovative value* and *expected outcome* to be the best and most relevant evaluation criteria for JPND calls.
4. Respondents suggested to further improve transparency in the evaluation and selection process. The success rate could be higher. The evaluation of project proposals continues to demand the careful selection of reviewers who are experts in the field. Conflict of interest should continue to be carefully taken into account.
5. For future calls, respondents favoured a project duration of 1-4 years, two-step calls and both open and targeted calls depending on the aims of the call.