

## Evaluation of consortium activities – External perception from the scientific community

Report by Serena Battaglia

Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR)

This report is part of Work Package 6:

**“Monitoring and continuous improvement of the NEURON II project”**

(Work Package Leader: ANR)



## Summary

In order to analyse and monitor the activities of NEURON, a questionnaire has been created to collect a feedback from the neuroscience community and stakeholders. The responses have been collected and analysed and will be used as input to gather recommendations for continuous improvement of practices for the next NEURON calls.

The main findings of the survey are:

- 1) Overall, the added value provided by NEURON's Joint Transnational Calls (JTCs) to the applicants and the topics' multidisciplinary nature were greatly appreciated by most of the survey participants.
- 2) The process for selecting topics for the JTCs was found to be consistent with the expectations and the needs of the neuroscience research community. The scope of the topics was evaluated as fairly balanced.
- 3) The procedures associated with the call were found to be rather efficient and NEURON's website was evaluated as informative.
- 4) Suggestions were made to improve the dissemination of information related to the JTCs, the evaluation procedures, as well as other NEURON activities.
- 5) A suggestion to establish a search tool to locate potential partners was made by many responders.

## Introduction

When launched in 2007, the ERA-Net NEURON (Network of European funding for Neuroscience research, [www.neuron-eranet.eu](http://www.neuron-eranet.eu)) established an operating group of research funding organisations in Europe and beyond, aiming to jointly fund research projects in the area of neurological diseases. Twenty-two funding organisations from 16 European countries, Israel and Canada now participate in the ERA-Net NEURON II.

A wide variety of activities are at the core of the work plan of the ERA-Net NEURON, among which are the launching of annual Joint Transnational Calls for proposals (JTCs), the organisation of thematic workshops and symposia with the participation of renowned researchers and the annual Excellent Paper in Neuroscience Award (EPNA).

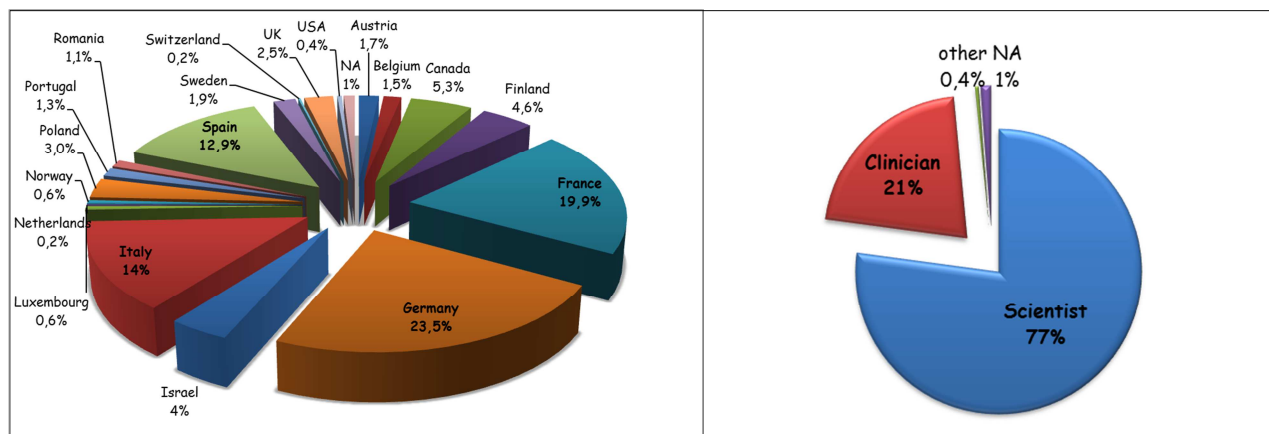
The assessment of past and on-going activities is a prerequisite for the continuous improvement of current and future NEURON achievements and provides a solid basis for short- and long-term planning, essential for the success of such overarching endeavours. Accordingly, the work plan of ERA-Net NEURON includes a monitoring process which takes into account the expectations of the ERA-Net partners as well as external assessments of NEURON's activities.

To evaluate NEURON's activities, a survey was conducted between January and May 2014, using an online questionnaire developed by the French National Research Agency (ANR), collecting feedback from stakeholders of NEURON JTCs 2008 to 2013, i.e. researchers from the neuroscience community. The questionnaire was sent to **1862** researchers from various disciplines (e.g. basic neuroscience, neurology and psychiatry) who had submitted proposals, acted as reviewers or scientific advisors to NEURON. The responses were collated and analyzed to meet the monitoring goals of NEURON II and were summarized as recommendations for improvement of practices and procedures.

## Feedback highlights

### A. Level of Response

The response rate was **28.4%** (528 answers) - a significant rate considering the heavy workload of the researchers approached. The translational aspects of NEURON's activity are shown by the fact that 21% of the responses came from clinicians (Fig.1).

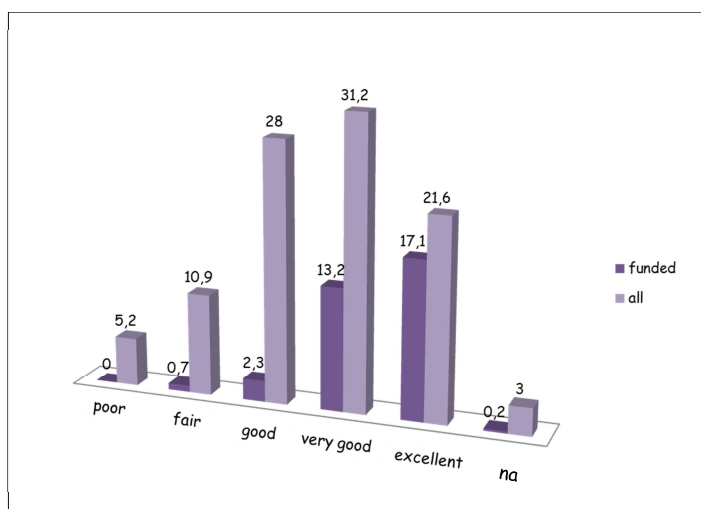


**Fig.1 – Statistics.**

The graphic on the left shows the **nationality** of responders: all countries participating in the NEURON program (JTCs) are represented. The graphic on the right shows the **category** of responders.

### B. Overall satisfaction with the JTCs and added value

Fig. 2 shows the degree of overall satisfaction of the responding scientists with NEURON JTCs. The majority of responders (52.8%) ranked NEURON JTCs as efficient or very efficient (31.2% and 21.6%, respectively) in promoting the neurosciences. The fact that the evaluation is independent of whether actual funding was granted to the responders makes this finding more significant. The most common strengths contributing to the overall satisfaction were: focused calls (specificity of the topics), small consortia (compared to FP7 programmes), easy application (online and lean format templates) and last but not least, good opportunity of early-career scientists to participate successfully.

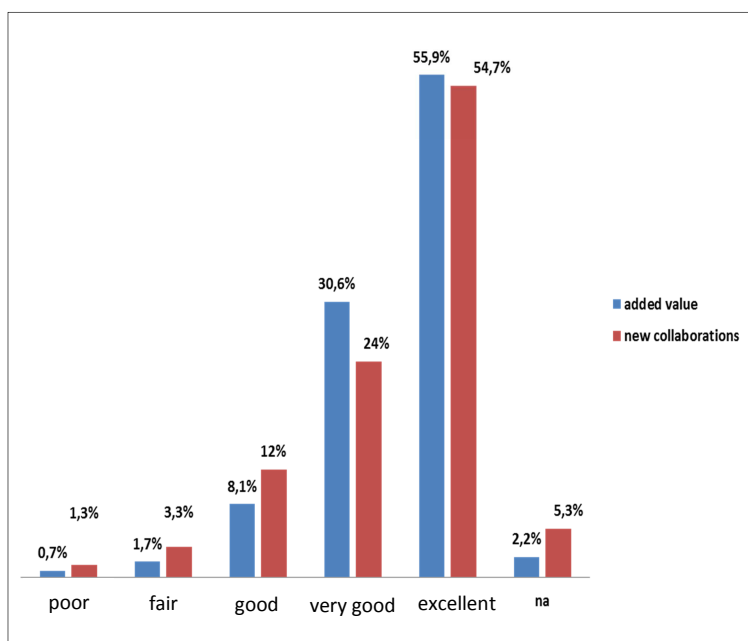


**Fig.2 – overall satisfaction.**

Responders were invited to rank between “poor” and “excellent”. Above histograms there are the percentages of answers. The graphic shows separately the answers of all responders (light purple) and only of funded applicants (deep purple).

A significant weakness of the NEURON JTC program that was repeatedly pointed out by the responding researchers was the transparency of the evaluation process. This criticism was made in spite of measures for transparency taken by NEURON so far which included: a clear description of the evaluation criteria in the call texts, explanations of the two-step process and the post-evaluation publication of the names of the peer-review-panel on the website; in addition, written evaluations are sent to coordinators of unselected proposals. Accordingly, NEURON II consortium made an effort to better describe the evaluation process on the NEURON II website and included it in the letters sent to the coordinators whose applications were not chosen for funding.

In addition to the above mentioned overall satisfaction of the responding researchers regarding the JTCs, the transnational collaboration was evaluated as having a real added value (Fig.3): 86.5% of the responders thought it was “excellent” (55.9%) or “very good” (30.6%). The majority of responders (78.7%) thought that NEURON’s multidisciplinary JTC program provided the opportunity to start new collaborations. More intense interactions in smaller groups with the possibility of new partners from related areas and scientific capacities appeared attractive to the research community.



**Fig.3 – Transnational collaboration.**

Responders were invited to rank the **added value** of transnational collaboration (blue bars) and the opportunity to start **new collaborations** (red bars) as a result of activities of ERA-Net NEURON. The numbers above the bars indicate the percentages of answers from all responders.

Along with the very positive responses on the essence of NEURON’s JTC activities, responders also pointed to several improvements they wish to see:

1. Responders indicated that some countries such as Switzerland, Netherlands, USA and BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) were not included in the NEURON JTCs and should be invited to participate in future calls.

Although this request seems attractive, one should bear in mind that although the ERA-Net scheme is a European instrument, network partnership are made on a voluntary basis and NEURON has already opened its doors to additional partners extending beyond the European Research Area.

2. Country-specific guidelines (eligibility rules, funding) should be harmonized in order to facilitate the building up of the consortium. Additionally, the disparity of funding levels allocated by the

participating countries and the complexity of entities authorized to participate in a given country make the building up of the consortium even more difficult.

NEURON JTCs, as all ERA-Nets, are not EU framework programs but managed by independent national funding organizations whose specific national and organizational regulations cover a whole spectrum of guidelines which are, most of the time, legally binding. The institutional requirements from the applicants add even more to the complexity of the JTCs. The different budget allocations made by the participating organizations derives from mandatory national restrictions and policies. Obviously, adding more countries will inevitably enlarge the complexity of procedures. Therefore harmonization efforts have significant limits and may not be implemented at all.

With the increasing numbers of participating countries, 64% of responders indicated that a search tool for potential collaborators applying to the JTC could be an effective tool in finding partners to create research consortia (Fig.4). The NEURON consortium will take this need into account.

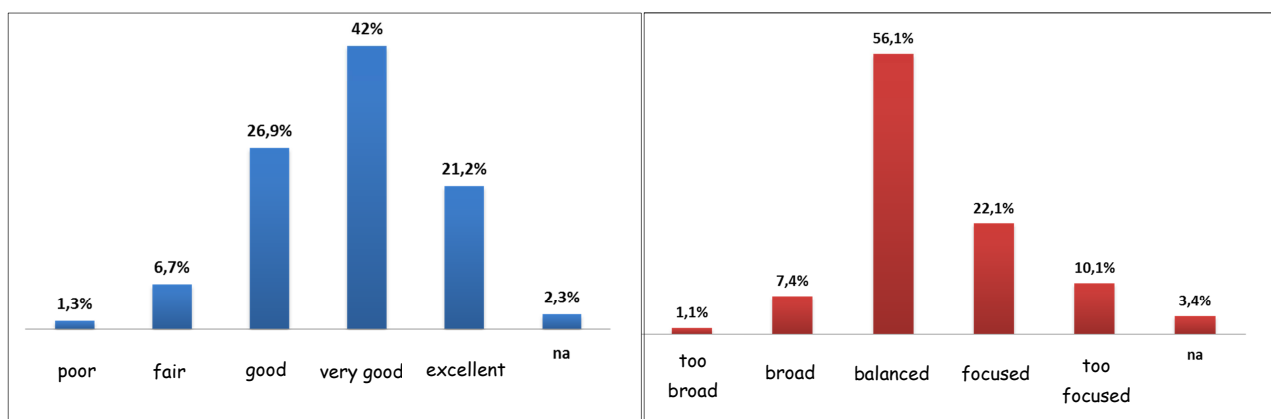


**Fig.4 – Search tool.**

The stakeholders were asked if the creation of database of interested scientists to participate in NEURON calls could be useful. The percentages of answers are shown as numbers above histogram columns.

### C. JTC topics

Another issue included in the questionnaire was the selection of topics for JTCs. The survey participants were asked to indicate to what extent the Call topics related to the needs of the neuroscientific community and how they evaluated the scope of the chosen topics. As seen in Fig. 5a and 5b, most of the responders indicated that the topic of each call was relevant to the research needs and the scope is considered well balanced.



**Fig.5 – Topics.**

Blue bars represent how the topics **fit** to the research needs and red bars indicate the **scope** of the topics. Numbers above histograms indicate the percentages of answers.

As a method of choosing the topics of the JTC, ERA-Net NEURON adopted a highly balanced process that included research symposia and workshops as well as consultations with researchers and the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) of NEURON. A Strategic Research Agenda (SRA) was published in early 2015 to be implemented in the following years. Interestingly, among the most common topics suggested by the survey responders for future calls were “Stroke” and “Neurodevelopmental disorders”. Both call topics were launched: ‘Stroke’ was the topic of the JTC in 2011 and, ‘Neurodevelopmental disorders’ was the chosen topic for JTC 2015. This fact clearly implies that the process for selecting topics for the JTCs is coherent with the expectations and the needs of the neuroscience community.

#### D. JTC Procedures and communication

Survey participants were asked to score the efficiency of the application and management procedures of the JTCs. As shown in Table 1, the responders evaluated the procedures as rather efficient. Some responders suggested allowing more time between the launch of the call and the submission deadline for the proposals, in order to better prepare their project. While this may be a valid point, the timeline of the JTC process is largely determined by the specific requirements of the national funding organizations, and therefore, unfortunately, there is no much room for flexibility.

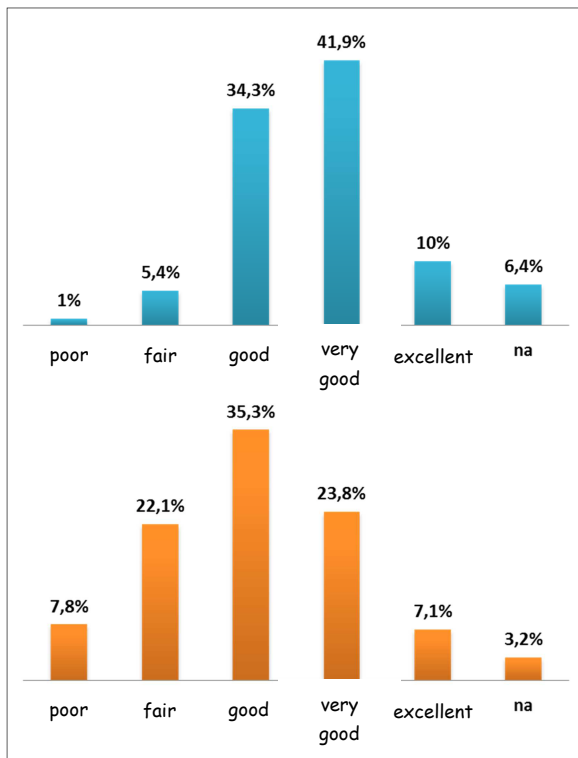
Call procedures	Mean Score
Clarity and comprehensiveness of the call texts	4
Clarity and usefulness of the instructions to the applicants	4
Efficiency of Call Secretariat	4
Efficiency of your national contact point	3,7
Limits in consortia composition	3,1
Duration of the projects (3 years)	3,5
Submission process	3,9
Evaluation process	3,4
Contract negotiation phase	3,4
Reporting requirements	3,4

**Table 1 – Call procedures.** The ranking score required was between 1 (= inefficient) and 5 (= very efficient).

The survey participants were also asked to evaluate the communication and dissemination activities related to the JTCs. Similar to other ERA-Nets, NEURON has developed and maintains a website which is the most important communication tool of the network. The annual announcements of NEURON JTCs are made on NEURON’s website. Subscribers to ‘call announcements’ are automatically informed by an email. NEURON participating organizations forward the announcements to national institutions and charities, blackboard and news feeders. In parallel, most of NEURON’s partners publish the call in the national language using their distribution routes.

While the structure of the website was found satisfactory (Fig.6), it was suggested to disseminate information about the progress of the funded projects.

From the survey's findings it appears that currently, the researchers learn about NEURON calls mainly through personal communication (61.5%) rather than on NEURON's website (29.2%) or through national funding organizations (37.3%). While 49.3% of the responders are aware of the NEURON newsletter, only 3% are aware of the video clips produced and installed on the website and about NEURON's Facebook page.



**Fig.6 – Communication.**

The top histograms represent the **satisfaction rate** with the structure and the content of the NEURON website. The lower histograms show the **effectiveness** of the dissemination of NEURON's activities.

## Conclusions

1. The rate of response to the survey was significant and therefore allows drawing operational conclusions.
2. The JTCs launched by NEURON were greatly appreciated by most of the survey participants. Specifically, the added value that NEURON provides to the applicants and the multidisciplinary topics that encouraged wide participation of researchers were highly valued.  
Suggestions on widening the participation to non-European partners and comments on the lack of harmonization between the national regulations and budgets were made.  
A clear suggestion to establish a search tool to identify potential partners was made by many responders.
3. The process for selecting of topics for the JTCs was found to be consistent with the expectations and the needs of the neuroscience research community. The scope of the topics was evaluated as fairly balanced.
4. The procedures associated with the call were found to be rather efficient and NEURON's website was evaluated as informative.  
Suggestions were made to improve the dissemination of information related to the JTCs, the evaluation procedures as well as other NEURON activities.