Lesson 3: Funding proposals and evaluation criteria

Learning outcomes:

LO#3 - The student can understand and contextualize European research funding frameworks and main European funding programmes and schemes to support research and innovation activities (e.g. Horizon Europe) and to identify synergies between funding schemes.

LO#5 - The student is familiar with the general process and principles of evaluation and assessment criteria of research proposals: what do funding agencies prefer, what they dislike, vocabulary required, how to interpret what is required in a specific call, aspects meaning advantage in the context of EU funded calls

LO#8 - The student is able to recognize the main components of a funding proposal and link them to the evaluation criteria of a given call for funding.

LO#11 - The student can explain the pre-award work and how it fits into the research cycle.

LO#18 -The student is able to accept others' views, and work together to provide the necessary support for the proposal's preparation.

LO#19 -The student is critical regarding his own work and that of others taking on a constructive attitude.

LO#20 -The student takes responsibility for its own work.

Introduction - what does a European funding proposal look like?

A **funding proposa**l is the result of often months of preparation to gather the right team and the right project that meets the demands of a specific **Call for Proposal**s and can be funded. When you prepare a funding proposal, you want to be funded. However, this is not always the case, as the whole process is very competitive. Indeed, the **success rates** of most funding programmes falls below 20%, meaning that at best 20 proposals out of 100 submitted will receive funding. So, applying to funding by submitting a **grant** (or funding proposal) is like playing a game: you play according to the rules, which imply that you design a project that meets the **evaluation criteria** the best you can, and the best proposal submitted in the same round of competition wins. Sometimes luck also plays a role. When several of the submitted proposals are of a very high quality but there are no funds available to fund them all, then the luck factor may be a bonus - but only if your proposal is already excellent and very well written!

There are different types of funding proposals. Those that are presented by a single organization **(single beneficiary**). In these we find the **individual fellowships**, for example to apply for a **fellowship**, a **travel grant** or those that contain **project proposals** to be carried out by a single

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team of researchers at a single institution. Often European proposals demand for the participation in the same project of different organizations, located in different countries. These organizations form a **consortium** in which one beneficiary is the **Coordinator** and the other are the participants. The proposals that involve consortia require substantial time of **networking** activities in order to contact potential partners and negotiate their participation in the proposal and subsequently in the approved project.

The **pre-award RMAs** can play a very important role in assuring that the proposals submitted are of high quality by addressing the evaluation criteria and complying with the admission conditions for the given call. Of course, the applicant should be expert in the topic of the Call for Proposals and should contribute to the scientific/technical sections of the proposal. But often, proposals require much more information than just the technical and scientific aspects of the proposed project. RMAs can specialise in supporting applicants in the non-scientific parts of the proposal. In doing so they can provide a valuable input into the proposal, and actively contribute to the likelihood of success of the proposal!

A full proposal must contain a lot of information in order to be funded, as it needs to meet compliance requirements and address all evaluation criteria. What does a European proposal really look like?

Most Horizon 2020/ Horizon Europe proposals share the same structure: they are organized according to three selection criteria. **Excellence**, **Impact** and **Implementation**. These criteria are then defined to correspond to the challenge of a Call for Proposals, thus the evaluation criteria are specific for each call.

Generally, the proposal is divided into two components: **Part A**, containing the administrative details of the proposals and partners and **Part B** contains the technical description of the proposed action. (Annex 1 to the Grant Agreement (Description of the Action: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/gap/doa/h2020-doa-ria-ia-csa_en.pdf)

In Part A you will find:

- General information on proposal (including an Abstract for the project)
- Declarations
- Administrative data of all partners
- Budget
- Ethics (and Security) issues
- Call specific questions (if any)

Part B is divided into two documents, one containing sections 1, 2 and 3, and the other sections 4 and 5.

The first three sections are the key core sections describing the action, structured according to the selection criteria. These three key sections are:

Section 1. Excellence

Section 2. Impact

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Section 3. Implementation

Then, there are two more sections, corresponding to:

Section 4. Members of the consortium

and Section 5. Ethics and security.

In **Section 1 Excellence** language understandable by non-specialists should be used to explain the need for the project. Jargon should be avoided. Several aspects will be assessed here, such as the novelty, the relevance and the timing of the proposed idea and the challenge that the approach represents. Figures, research data, and statistics can and should be used to support the ideas and the approach described in this section.

Generally, section 1 is divided in the following headings:

1.1 Objectives

1.2 Relation to the work programme

1.3 Concept and methodology

1.4 Ambition

The **Section 2 Impac**t describes the sum of the influences and effects that the project has on all its potential target groups (**stakeholders**) and on the field, after the project ends.

Generally, Section 2 is divided in the following headings:

2.1 Expected impacts, including those listed in the Work Programme topic, but also the barriers/and framework conditions to the maximization of impact.

2.2 Measures to maximise impact. Here it is important to describe three key types of measures:

Communication = How the project impacts will be shared to society

Dissemination = how the project results will be shared with others

Exploitation = how the project results will be used

In **Section 3 Implementation** of the research proposal, the work plan must be very clearly detailed in accordance to the project objectives.

This Section is generally divided into the following headings:

3.1 Work plan

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The proposed work is generally divided into **Work Packages**, which are the set of tasks that are necessary to be performed to address each of the project's **goals**. Each Work package is expected to produce several **Deliverables**.

Deliverables - outputs (*e.g. information, special report, a technical diagram brochure, list, a software milestone or other building block of the project*) that must be produced at a given moment during the action.

The work should be organized in time in a **Gantt Chart** or timeline for the project proposal.

3.2 Management structure, milestones and procedures

The **Management Structure** describes the governing bodies of the project, the decision-making rules and the frequency of project meetings and internal communication within the partners of the consortium. This is only relevant for large projects that involve several organizations.

Milestones should be defined. Milestones are steps in the project that help to assess the project's progress. They can correspond to the moments when a key deliverable will be completed, for example.

3.3 Consortium as a whole. Here the composition of the team/partners of the consortium is described emphasizing the added value of performing the work together.

3.4 Resources to be committed. Here the budget necessary to do the project is detailed.

In Section 4. Members of the consortium each partner of the consortium is described. It includes a brief description of the institution and of the individuals contributing to the project. This section does generally not have a page number limit.

In Section 5. Ethics and Security all ethical and security issues that the project proposal raises must be identified and an explanation about how they will be addressed should be included. This section does not generally have a page number limit.

Above it is described the structure of a European proposal. Other funding agencies, national or international, use other structures, which can be much simpler. In any case, there are common elements in all proposals, and once one is familiar with one type of funding proposal, it is easier to identify the similarities and particularities in other types of proposals. There are parts that generally appear in any type of proposal. A typical proposal structure can be:

- Title
- Summary or abstract

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- State of the art, describing the need for the project, similar studies, preliminary results, expected impacts and ambition
- Main question and work objectives
- Workplan, including methodology, timeline, deliverables, milestones, budget, description of team/institutions, management aspects, risk analysis and contingency plans, security and ethics

The European funding documentation is full of specific vocabulary. Some of the **vocabulary describes the underlying policies** that gave rise to a given call. Examples include terms such as "Circular Economy", "Green Deal", "Cross Cutting issues", "Frontier Research", "Open Science", "Responsible Research and Innovation" etc. In grants, it is important to understand what the funders vocabulary means and to **"recycle" the funders wording** to some extent to help the evaluators to easily match the information that is asked for by the evaluation criteria and the proposal text.

Other "European" terms used come from the **vocabulary linked to European funding** itself, such as "call for proposal", "deadline", "redress procedure", "coordination and support action", etc. Some of this vocabulary is introduced in this module, but there are plenty of words to learn and this takes time and might seem discouraging when one is attempting to assemble a funding proposal for the first time. Also, when one applies to other funding agencies, the vocabulary for describing the same actions can be completely different. For example, in the American NIH vocabulary: a "call for proposals" is an "announcement" and the deadline is "due date" (https://grants.nih.gov/grants/grants_process.htm).

The **style of writing** a grant grant is also very important and can be a factor influencing the success in obtaining funds. When writing about research, it is important to explain simply concepts that can be often complex. Thus, one should use an **effective writing** style in which one writes to be understood using the simple phrase structures, familiar and short common words, short sentences and paragraphs.

The aim of writing a grant is primarily to get funds, thus the grant text needs also to be convincing. A **persuasive writing** style is also needed. This consists of using subtle techniques to make the text stand out from the others, often inspired by techniques used in publicity and marketing. Examples consist of using present and future tense verbal forms instead of passive voices to show action; using "I" or "we" to show responsibility of the main candidate or his/her team in performing the work; to repeat key ideas throughout the text; to bring to the front the benefits; to make the proposal visual by using simple infographics, separating the text into clear headings, using short paragraphs, using moderately tools to highlight text such as "bold" or "underline", etc.

Analysis of funding proposals

From a given group of selected European **funding proposals** (Part B only, can be approved and/or not approved):

- Identify main sections of the proposal

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- What guiding policy may be underlying the call that gave rise to the given proposal (see sections 1.1 Objectives and 1.2 Relation to the work programme)?
- What are the specific evaluation criteria for this call? (call text (or /work programme or guide for applicants)
- Are the proposals organized by the selection criteria?
- Can you identify examples of persuasive writing? Or examples of effective writing?
- Can you identify specific wording recycled from the call or Work Programme text?

Evaluation of funding proposals

Given the specific **Evaluation Criteria** (in the work programme or guide for applicants for the specific Call for Proposals) and the **Self Evaluation form** (https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/call_ptef/ef/2018-2020/h2020-call-ef-ria-ia-csa-2018-20_en.pdf) containing the **scoring scale** and description of each score for each proposal:

- How does the given proposal address the specific evaluation criteria? Groups can evaluate the proposal according to all or just some criteria; give scores; some groups can comment on the evaluation performed by the other groups

Pages with examples of proposals, to check: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279923828_Successful_Marie_Curie_Research_Proposal_Example

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