

Lesson 4: Preparation of a project proposal

Learning outcomes:

LO#6 - 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#7 - The student can analyse a given European call for funding from the perspective of its underlying policy (need for the call) and proposal (goals, activities, and expected outcomes and impact).

LO#15 - With the help of the teacher, the student can draft a simple budget for a proposal, according to the activities planned for the different project phases and milestones.

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.

The students will continue their project (started in Module 1) and further plan its implementation. The sections described are particularly targeted to Project type 1 but can be easily adapted to the other type of projects.

1. Plan the project

The student will divide their work plan into coherent work packages, deliverables, milestones and including a timetable that is appropriate for what the student wants to do. This can be done in groups or individually.

First, the goal and expected impact of the research proposed should be clearly established. It is important to describe the **State of the art**, by briefly telling about the '**big idea**' for the project and what previous data (published or unpublished) led to propose it, and how it could significantly add to your field. It is extremely important that the **need** for the project is clearly described, and that it is **timely**.

A short statement of the **specific hypothesis** or the **specific goals** attempted to reach within the project period that can directly support or refute the 'big idea'.

This reflection cannot be separated from the thinking about the **expected impact** of the project. What results will be expected and what **change** will they produce? What wider impacts will your project have?

Another very important aspect of project planning is: what **team** is required to achieve the project goals? This aspect will be addressed below.

Having clearly defined the goals and expected impact for the study, one can start planning the concrete activities for the project in a coherent and comprehensive **work plan**. The activities to be performed must fit within the project period to directly address the stated hypothesis/objective.

2. Partnership building

A crucial aspect of the success of any proposal is to ensure that the “best team possible” is available to perform it. In a research project, the “best team possible” of a given project is the team that has the necessary technical know-how to implement the planned action, but also a team that has access to equipment, facilities, services or know-how that will be necessary. In other types of projects, the best team possible may be the team that has the best contacts or access to a wide range of people, institutions, services, etc. Also, the team must be suited to ensure that the project results will be known for the project to be able to accomplish its expected impact.

Many European calls for proposals demand the establishment of international teams, in particular those that require partners from at least three Member States. Moreover, the reasoning to assemble such large transnational teams is to generate added value from that transnational character, such as impact at European or global level. As these proposals are highly demanding in terms of impact, they can gather a wide list of entities directly or indirectly participating in the action. Many stakeholders can participate. Examples are companies, universities, research centres, Non-governmental organizations such as consumer associations, patient associations or other, public authorities, hospitals, policy makers, etc.

The challenge for the student is to identify the right partner for his/her proposal. What type of expertise is necessary to accomplish the project? What type of people or institutions are needed? What for? Is there a good complementarity of expertise? Is a geographical balance of partners location important? Which partners should be core to develop the activities proposed and should be part of the consortium versus those that should be involved in achieving the impact of the project (target audiences for dissemination, communication and exploitation activities? Build the ideal consortium, if this is what the project requires.

With a clear idea of how the project could be implemented and the partners it requires, and some knowledge about the types of funding available, it would be challenging to look for a suitable funding agency, programme or call to apply to with the student’s own research project proposal. This could be a challenge to take home and perform outside the class time. Basically, it will be necessary to 1) Screen work programmes, 2) shortlist and prioritise topics, checking deadlines, 3) try to estimate chances of success.

3. Budget preparation

The student will draft a simple budget for a proposal, according to the activities planned for the different project phases and milestones.

Suggestion: for the research proposal, set up a budget of maximum 200 000 Euros for one year to be spent at a single host institution and not requiring co-funding. No subcontracting will be necessary. Template provided:

INSTITUTION 1			
Direct Personnel costs			
Other direct costs			
Of which Subcontracting			
Indirect costs			
Total			
RTD activities			
Personnel costs		Unitary Cost	Person-month Cost
Ph.D contracts			
Post-Doc contracts			
Other research contracts/fellowships			
Staff contracts			
Others:			
Total			
Equipment			
0			
0			
0			
Total			
Consumables			
0			
0			
0			
0			
0			
0			
Total			
Other specific costs			
Conferences			
Meetings			
Dissemination			
Publication costs			
Subcontracting			
Audit certificate			
Others:			
Total			
Total direct costs			

To guide into the setup of a budget the following should be considered:

- Generally, a proposal project requires people (called **Human Resources**) to do the work, so this must be considered in the budget. If the person doing the work already works at a given institution, it is common to estimate the time it will dedicate to the project as a **percentage of their work time** during the project's length, and to estimate what this time represents in terms of salary cost. Sometimes projects imply the **recruitment** of new people to do the work, thus the budget should contain the full cost of the salary of the people to hire.
- Common research costs can be of many different types. Examples are publication costs in Open Access, purchasing consumables, materials, services, software licences, the cost of preparing and submitting patents, the costs of travelling and accommodation to attend conferences, to collaborate with international partners, to participate in events, to do field expeditions to collect data, etc.
- Some types of research often require purchasing of specific equipment. The cost of the equipment can be included in the project costs, but only to the extent it is used by the team of the project within the project's length. In accounting standards a given equipment had a prefixed lifetime. Hence, if the project is shorter than the equipment's lifetime, it is only possible to include as a project cost only a part of the equipment full cost.
- Other types of projects may have many sorts of costs, depending on the nature of the activities planned
- All the costs mentioned above are the **Direct Costs** because they directly contribute to the implementation of the project.
- However, all costs also require **Indirect Costs**, that is, costs that are linked to the maintenance of research facilities and services of the institutions which are necessary for institutions to work but that are not directly linked to the project. They are also called **Overhead Costs**. Many research institutions rely on overheads for their normal functioning.
- In some specific call, the funder will only support part of the project costs. In these cases, there is a **co-funding rate**, for example of 40%, meaning that the project must be supported partially by own funds of the host institution of the project. In the example, 40% of all costs of the project will have to be co-funded by the host institution.
- **Subcontracting** is when a significant part of the activities is performed by a third party that does not belong to the consortia. Subcontracting costs can be included in the budget, but they are not considered for calculating the overheads.
- Also, if the proposal involves a team involving members in different host institutions (**consortium**), the budget, if approved, will have to be distributed by the partner host institutions in order that the partner part of the work can be carried as planned.

At the proposal phase, a realistic budget that complies with international, national and institutional rules is important to be established. The more realistic a budget is, the easier it will be to spend it according to the project plan, and the less problems will arise during the implementation plan.

Reflect on **what could be a “bad” budget**. What problems may arise? Which current pitfalls are most prevalent? From the diversity of potential problematic situations identified, it will become clear the role that a **Pre-award RMA** may have in avoiding potential problems by providing the necessary support during the phase of budget preparation for the research proposal. Sometimes, certain institutions install a process of **Budget Validation** by pre-award RMAs or administrative services to prevent proposals with “bad budgets” to be submitted.