foRMAtion

Lesson 4 - Preparation of a project proposal

Keywords

- State-of-the-art
- Team building
- Budgets and 'Bad budgets'
- Human resources
- Direct costs
- Indirect costs/Overhead costs
- Subcontracting
- Co-funding

Learning Objectives

⑥ ⑦ ⑮
⑱ ⑲ ⑳

Scan for complete LOs

Go to the exercise
https://learningapps.org/watch?v=p2929pmdc22

Go to video
https://youtu.be/3iogP_WwPMY

Simulating a project proposal

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

Planning the project

Students will divide their work plan into coherent work packages, deliverables, milestones and include an appropriate and realistic timetable to carry out their project. This can be done in groups or individually.

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**state-of-the-art** by briefly detailing the '**big idea**' driving the project and which previous data (published or unpublished) led to propose it.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

A short statement about the **specific hypothesis** or the particular **goals** set out to be reached by the project, able to directly support or refute the 'big idea', should be included.

This cannot be separated from thinking about the **expected impact** of the project. What results are envisioned and what **change** will they produce? Which wider impacts do you anticipate your project will have?

Another very important aspect of project planning is **team building:** which team is required to be able to achieve the project's goals? This aspect will be addressed below.

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

2. Partnership building

A crucial aspect for the success of any proposal is to ensure that the *best possible team* is available. In a research project, the ***best possible team*** for a is not only the team with the necessary technical know-how to implement the planned actions, but also the team with access to equipment, facilities or services needed. In other types of projects, the *best possible team* may be the team who has the richest network of contacts or has access to a wide range of people, institutions, services, etc. Also, a winning team must be suited communication-wise, to ensure that the project results have maximum visibility and accomplish its expected impact.

Many European calls for proposals demand the establishment of **international teams**, especially those requiring partners from at least three Member States. The reason behind the formation of such large international teams is to generate added value from the transnational character and bring this asset to impact at European or global level. As these proposals are highly demanding in terms of impact, they consider a wide list of actors directly or indirectly participating in the action. Many stakeholders can take part, including companies, universities, research centres, NGOs (such as consumer associations, patient associations or others), public authorities, hospitals, policymakers, 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 there a geographical balance of partners? Which partners are core to the development of the activities proposed and should therefore be part of the consortium? Which ones should be involved in achieving the impact of the project (target audiences for communication, dissemination, and exploitation activities)? The project might require you to build the ideal consortium to deliver the project successfully.

With a clear idea of how the project could be implemented (work plan), which partners it requires (team building), and what types of funding are available, the challenge could be to **look for a suitable funding agency, programme or call to submit the student's research project proposal.** This could be a take-home task performed outside class time. It could entail 1) Screening work programmes 2) Shortlisting and prioritising topics, 3.) Checking deadlines 4) Trying 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.

Use the template below.

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			

Figure 17 - Example of a budget template

In setting up a budget the following aspects should be considered:

- Generally, a research proposal requires people (called **human resources)** to perform the tasks set up. This must be accounted for in the budget. If the person designed to perform the tasks already works at a given institution involved in the project, it is common to estimate the time he/she will dedicate to the project as a **percentage of their work time** during the project's duration and calculate what this time represents in terms of salary cost. Sometimes projects require the specific **recruitment of new**

people to perform the tasks, thus the budget should contain the full cost of the salary of newly hired people.

- Common research costs can be of many different types. These include Open Access publication costs, the purchasing of consumables, materials, services, software licenses, costs for preparing and submitting patents, costs of travelling and accommodation to attend conferences and events, expenses tied to collaborating with international partners, costs for field expeditions to collect data, etc.

- Some types of research often require the purchasing of specific equipment. The cost of this equipment can be included in the project costs, but only if it is used by the project's team within the project's duration (and not beyond). In accounting standards, a given piece of equipment has a prefixed lifetime. Hence, if the project is shorter than the equipment's expected lifetime, it is only possible to include part of the equipment's full cost as a project cost.

- Depending on the nature of the activities planned, projects may have all sorts of costs.

- All costs mentioned above are **Direct Costs** because they directly contribute to the implementation of the project.

- However, all projects also entail **Indirect Costs**, meaning costs that are linked to the maintenance of research facilities and services within the institutions performing the tasks but that are not directly linked to the project. They are also called **Overhead Costs**. It is no secret that many research institutions rely on overheads for their normal functioning.

- In some specific calls, the funder will only support part of the project costs. In these cases, there is a **co-funding rate**, meaning that the project must be supported partially by the own funds of the host institution. If the co-funding rate is 40%, the project will have to be co-funded by the host institution for 40% of its overall costs, while the remining 60% will be financed by the funding body.

- **Subcontracting** is when a significant part of the activities planned in a project is performed by a third party who does not belong to the consortium. Subcontracting costs can be included in the budget, but they are not considered in the calculation of overhead costs.

- Also, if the proposal involves a team of different host institutions (**consortium**), the budget, if approved, will have to be distributed between the partner host institutions so that each one can carry out the tasks as planned.

During the proposal phase, it is important to establish a **realistic budget** that complies with international, national and institutional rules. An accurate budget estimation will make it easier to spend it according to the project plan and will mitigate problems 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 potentially problematic situations identified, the role a **pre-award RMA** may have in avoiding potential problems by providing the necessary support during the phase of budget preparation will become clear. Sometimes, certain institutions set up a process of **Budget Validation** carried out by pre-award RMAs or administrative services to prevent the submission of proposals with 'bad budgets'.