Guidelines for coordinating a Horizon proposal

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Guidelines for coordinating a Horizon[1] Proposal

Set out below are some, hopefully, useful tips for anyone planning to coordinate a proposal for a competitive research funding call with a particular focus on H2020/Horizon Europe programs. While it is written with topic-specific calls (top-down) in mind, many of the points are also applicable to bottom-up calls such as the Marie Sklodowska Curie actions.

Influencing Call Topic Texts

With a view to having some influence on specific call topic drafting or even on funding programme formation, try to get involved in a relevant EU technology platform (ETPs), a Public-Private partnership (e.g. SPIRE), an industry representative group (e.g. EFPIA, EFFRA) or a Research & Policy group (e.g. European Materials Modelling (EMMC) or Materials Characterisation (EMCC) councils) involved in policy formation and, sometimes, in funding programme and even call topic definition. This ***link*** lists many of the ETPs. Through your own contacts, your institute's research office, National Contact Points (NCP)s, etc., find out who is involved in such groups and talk to them; learn what trends/topics are being discussed for future funding programmes, give input on what you would like to see, etc. Overall, this would have to be a very early activity – at least 2 years before a call topic is opened. While it is now too late to significantly influence Horizon Europe ***2021*** calls, it is not too late for 2022/3 calls, the first drafts of which we may see later this year.

Get sight of ***early drafts*** of the funding 'Work Programmes' call documents, usually provided by the Enterprise Ireland-based National Contact Points (NCPs)); these documents contain all the topic-specific detail. For topics of interest, seek to tweak the text, particularly if they are far out, time-wise, and not fully written yet. Give clear guidance to the relevant NCP on this; also, reach out to relevant ETPs and European Commission (EC) staff who you may be able to get access to at EC-sponsored events for particular funding programme launches, usually in Brussels (Webinars only during this COVID era). Continue this process as each iteration of the Work Programmes are published.

Consortium building

Again, start early, i.e., as soon as a call topic of interest is published, even in draft form. If building a consortium from scratch, you need to be starting at least one year in advance of the proposal submission date. There will likely be two or three key players in the segment that your chosen call is in that would be great to have in your consortium; these are likely to be entities that were perhaps funded for projects in the same or related areas in earlier funding schemes - academia/institutions

[1] **H2020: Horizon 2020 (2014-2020); HE: Horizon Europe (2021-2027)**

that are particularly strong in the space. Prepare an abstract and approach these people, inviting them to join your consortium. You will likely not get them all but if you are early and convincing enough, you will likely get some to join you; if they prevaricate, let them think about it and keep them posted (gently) on your progress, for a while at least. They may wish to keep their options open and may be open to joining later.

Attend key relevant events

These include conferences and European Commission Funding programme launch events. Regarding these 'launch' events, review lists of attendees beforehand and request meetings with those of interest. Whether or not you present at these events and show your hand somewhat, is a strategic decision. If your consortium building is going well, for example, and you have the kernel of a good consortium, then probably best not to present.

Adopt a similar approach to the many online ***partnering sites***. There is usually a specific one for each funding programme category (e.g. Innovative Medicines Initiative [IMI] Partner Site); then there is the one on the European Commission's Funding & Tenders (F&T) portal which is really worthwhile keeping an eye on as you'll see who is interested in the call (maybe your competition) and you may pick up a good partner from it but as it only opens about 6 months prior to submission date, you'll likely have much of your consortium already in place. These sites are probably of more value to you if you are just seeking to get your name out there and/or interested in finding a partnering slot in somebody else's consortium.

Consortium Formation: Be clear on the various areas of expertise you need, targeting members for those areas, avoiding overlaps, addressing gaps, having them declare if involved in a competing proposal, have past experience in EU proposals; ensure adequate sectoral coverage (academia, Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Research and Technology Organisations (RTOs)), geographical spread (<40% of budget to any one country) and members that may be in a position to contribute in-kind to the project.

Be open to consortium members suggesting other potential members but be discerning – might just be their pals! Ask potential members to document what they can contribute to the project, their competencies, facilities, personnel and experience with research funding applications and level of success. Check them out. People in your network may have experience with this partner in the past – were they committed and a strong contributor? Your Research Office can be a valuable resource here. Don't be afraid to drop a member, even late in the preparation (due perhaps to poor engagement, some disagreement, other) but only if you have a replacement or their role can be absorbed by an existing member. Member location is an important factor when it comes to cost. Labour rates are particularly high in Scandinavian countries, with Norway topping the list.

Information gathering

From the moment you target a particular call topic, keep alert for all relevant information – publications, data, reports, event proceedings, policies, European/Global events/trends (economic, political, societal), newly funded research projects in the area and so on. As background to this ongoing exercise, keep in mind the scope of the call and, most particularly, the impacts required, as stated in the text. Don't rush out spending a lot of money on market reports - they vary widely in marker segment definition, categorisation and projections in a given technology/market sector. Best approach is to get the summary of several reports (these Market Research firms will usually provide a substantial summary free of charge) and by a series of cross-checking, adding in your own knowledge gleaned from publications, press releases, Company reports, consortium members, you can derive relevant conclusions/projections for your specific requirements.

Market Reports via EI: Enterprise Ireland subscribe to several market research firms and so have access to market report databases; there is a chance you will find something of interest but the access that EI can give you is somewhat limited; enquire via the NCP.

Funders Wavelength

Be clear on the policy context behind the call topic you are applying under and make clear connections between your research project activities, outcomes and impacts with the Funding Agency's policy briefs in this area, copiously referencing Policy Documents and reports, of which there are many in the case of the European Commission.

At least in the case of the EC's funding programmes (H2020/HE), not alone must you regularly revisit the call text to keep reminding yourself of the requirements, but ensure you pay close attention to all background/supporting texts; for example, the introductions/preambles in the Work programme; any connected documents such as FAQs; relevant EC policy documents and reports; EC presentations/webinars launching the call(s) and the Q&A sessions following. Ensure to attend local ***Funding Call*** information events. These will typically be run by your institution's Research Office, also events put on by any SFI Research Centre that you may be connected or Enterprise Ireland organised events.

Proposal Writing

Set a hard ***deadline,*** which is at least seven days prior to submission date, for having the proposal as good as finalised, i.e., having all external reviews/proof-readings completed. Work backwards from that date to set your milestones. For example, if you are going to have an external reviewer (one with Evaluator experience) review the proposal, have an advanced draft with him/her at least two weeks prior to submission. A good ***reviewer*** who gives clear, well documented feedback is invaluable; feedback provided via a separate report rather than tracked changes on the proposal is best, but, most of all, leave yourself enough time to address the reviewer's inputs and, indeed, to revert to him/her for further review.

While there is little doubt that it is valuable to poll consortium members for ideas on how the project/proposal might be structured, such as specific research component (Work Programmes [WP]) titles and leaders, etc., as coordinator, you set the agenda and make key decisions in a timely fashion so as to keep to the schedule. Give clear instructions to members, particularly to WP leaders as to what is expected of them and by when. Provide templates for information gathering and make sure they are laid out in a way that makes them almost 'drop-in' usable for the proposal. Have the ***WP leaders*** run calls on their WP design and documenting of same for the proposal; as coordinator, attend all meetings and contribute liberally to ensure they are staying on track, that WPs are complementary to the other WPs and within the call topic requirements.

Coordinator's Role: Keep oversight of the writing progress and content, at all times, to ensure adherence to the call topic requirements, complementarity and appropriate interconnections between WPs, proper timings and consistency across objectives (overall project objectives and specific WP objectives), milestones, deliverables and that they clearly address/contribute to the call scope and required impacts.

Inevitably, there is a lot of ***latent information***/knowledge within the consortium members that can be of great value to the proposal. This needs to be extracted to help with the writing (excellence, ambition, State of the Art (SotA), beyond SotA, Intellectual Property (IP), market intelligence, likely impacts and so on). Schedule calls with various cohorts of your consortium on specific topic areas needed for the proposal; it can be useful to prepare a comprehensive questionnaire with particular focus on gathering information in areas where you feel the proposal might be weak and have all consortium members complete it; you may be surprised by the valuable information this can uncover. Identify specific individual expertise and tap into it; validate data/key information you have gleaned from elsewhere, with members.

Start writing early; ideally, allocate ***writing duties*** to 2 or 3 people in your/coordinator's group. For example, one person each for Excellence, Impact and Implementation. Tap consortium members for input; WP leaders, for example, will write their WP including objectives and deliverables. Try to get your hands on a successful proposal, particularly to the same funding programme (e.g.: H2020 ITN, NMBP, Health; IMI, other).

Letters of Support (LoS). They are not mandatory but are almost always provided and are more important where there is a commercialisation emphasis in the call. It is vital to start working on well in advance of submission date as it can take companies in particular some time to get approval. Minimise the effort required by the LoS providers by supplying a template with each request, customised to the particular entity if at all possible. That way the LoSs look more genuine rather than the same bland boilerplate LoS from everybody.

Administration

Be clear on such basics as: is it a single stage or two stage call? What is the budget for the call and number of projects likely to be funded? Clarity on submission dates/times. In the case of a 2nd stage proposal (a 2-stage topic), know how many competitors you have (those that have passed stage 1) and who they are (your NCP can usually tell you who the coordinators are) and where you were positioned in that line-up, following the stage 1 evaluation. Set up the project on the EC Funding & Tenders portal at the outset, getting all consortium member names entered with at least the lead person in each case. Then instruct all members to complete the entries, adding more names if they wish.

Use a common access portal, such as a ***Sharepoint***, for the proposal and all associated documentation. Ensure it is ***robust*** and has all the required functionality – particularly that of supporting multiple users simultaneously writing/editing; when editing, synchronise frequently. Populate the proposal with key pieces of information as they come to hand – repetition issues, consistency, streamlining and formatting can all be addressed later. Get the ***organisational description*** (section 4) templates out to the members early with instructions to complete them in the context of the call topic. Also, and especially for big projects (large number of beneficiaries), start the ***budget discussion*** early but, obviously, only after WPs are fully defined – say, about 1 month before submission date. Be prepared for some haggling. If the Coordinator feels knowledgeable enough on the costings for all of the activities across the WPs, then he/she may issue a budget guideline to each member, leaving some room for negotiation. Ensure there is a balance in the budget allocation, particularly in terms of person-months across the WPs. Be clear on what is fundable in the particular call.

Understand the submission process

Don't underestimate the submission process. There will typically be a number of documents to be uploaded in addition to the online items (Online: List of participants, abstract, budget, ethics, key questions). The F&T portal runs validation checks and it is not unusual for it to throw up issues. It is therefore highly recommended that the ***1st submission is done at least 24 hours*** before the deadline, even if the proposal is not final. There is no limit to the number of times the proposal can be submitted with the most recent submission being the only one taken into account. Remember the deadline is 4pm here as opposed to the 5pm (Brussels time), as quoted in the guide.

Consultant – Yes or No

For stage 1 of a 2-stage proposal, a Consultant should not be necessary. The quality of your consortium is a key determinant of success at stage 1 and, typically, a consultant is not hired for consortium formation. If you have limited experience with proposal writing, insist on getting a lot of support from your research office; get your hands on previous proposals, especially successful ones; talk to colleagues with experience and, of course, enlist help from consortium members. For a stage 2 or a single stage proposal, where the coordinator has no or minimal experience with proposal writing, has limited help and time is short (between a stage 1 result and stage 2 submission date, for example), serious consideration should be given to hiring a Consultant.

> ***Consultant Pedigree:*** If you decide to hire a consultant to help with the proposal, get recommendations and hire a good one - one that can streamline the proposal, build a solid story with all pieces hanging together, complementing sections / no repetition, ensuring accuracy and consistency across the whole proposal, has ideas on attractive layout and graphics, and makes for a captivating read overall, particularly the opening few pages. The consultant should be able to contribute to the writing, particularly to the less scientific sections such as the Impact.

While it may seem useful to have the consultant handle a lot of the administration, coordination and communications between members, it is not a good use of their expensive time; seek internal assistance for these activities (your Research Office, other). A good consultant will be expensive, particularly for a large consortium (e.g. 240 hours @ €135/hour) so seek a cost-sharing arrangement, ensuring all members and, indeed, the consultant are agreeable (some consultants will not support such a model, preferring to invoice one entity only, the coordinator usually). The consultancy ***fee allocation*** can be done on the basis of the budget request by each partner in the proposal with the Coordinator perhaps funding a somewhat larger proportion (Irish coordinator has access to an ***Enterprise Ireland grant*** of €4k for consultancy plus €8k for travel and staff). There will usually be no problem with this arrangement in a stage 2 proposal where chances of success are relatively high. It may be more difficult for partners to accept in a single-stage scenario.