

LECTURE 3. DEVELOPING AN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT PROPOSAL AND GRANT APPLICATION

Lecture plan

1. The structure of an international project proposal: executive summary, relevance, objectives, results, methodology, impact and sustainability.
2. Formulating the overall goal, specific objectives, expected results and indicators.
3. Constructing work packages, tasks, activities, project deliverables, milestones and the implementation plan.
4. Methodology for preparing the application form and the technical description of the project.
5. Criteria for evaluating international project applications: relevance, quality, impact, sustainability, cost-effectiveness.
6. Common mistakes in writing grant applications and ways to prevent them.

1. The structure of an international project proposal: executive summary, relevance, objectives, results, methodology, impact and sustainability

Despite differences between the templates used by various donors, the overwhelming majority of international project proposals (whether a concept note or a full application) share a common logical structure that reflects the sequence of argumentation from the problem to the expected effect.

1) Executive Summary / Abstract. A concise (as a rule, no more than one page) presentation of the essence of the project: the problem, the goal, the key activities, the expected results, the composition of the consortium, and the budget and duration. Despite appearing at the beginning of the document, the executive summary is traditionally written last, once all sections of the application have been finalised and agreed.

2) Relevance and rationale (Relevance / Background and Rationale). A section that demonstrates the existence of the problem, its scale and significance for the target groups and society as a whole, drawing on statistical data, research and strategic documents; it demonstrates the alignment of the project idea with the priorities of the specific donor call (examined in detail in Lecture 2, Section 6).

3) Objectives. The formulation of the overall goal and the specific objectives in accordance with the logic of intervention.

4) Methodology (Methodology / Approach). A description of the approach to project implementation, justification of the choice of methods, tools and activity formats, and the logical link between the methodology and the expected results.

5) Work Plan. The breakdown of activity into work packages, tasks and activities, indicating the responsible partners and the timeframes (examined in detail in Section 3).

6) Expected Results and Impact. A description of the immediate results (outputs), intermediate effects (outcomes) and long-term impact (impact) of the project, including quantitative and qualitative indicators.

7) Sustainability. Justification of how the project's results will retain their value after donor funding ends — institutional, financial, political and environmental sustainability.

8) Project Management and Consortium. A description of the organisational management structure, the division of roles among partners, and the mechanisms for coordination and communication.

9) Budget. A detailed project budget by expenditure item, aligned with the work plan (examined in detail in Topic 6).

10) Annexes. Partner documents, CVs of key personnel, letters of support, declarations, and the applicant's legal and financial documentation.

2. Formulating the overall goal, specific objectives, expected results and indicators

The formulation of the objectives of a project proposal must strictly follow the hierarchy of the intervention logic examined in Topic 2, while also taking into account a number of applied rules.

The overall goal is formulated as a contribution ("to contribute to", "to make a contribution to", "to support the achievement of") to a broader strategic goal, since no single project can, on its own, guarantee its achievement.

The specific objective is formulated as a concrete, measurable effect for the target group, arising from the use of the project's results; it is recommended that it be formulated in terms of the desired change of state ("the level of ... has been raised", "access to ... has been expanded", "capacity ... has been strengthened"), rather than in terms of activity ("to conduct", "to organise" — such formulations belong at the level of activities).

The SMART rule for formulating objectives and results: every formulation must be Specific, Measurable, Achievable within the available resources, Relevant to the identified problem, and Time-bound.

A common mistake is the substitution of means for objectives: the formulation “To conduct 10 training seminars for 200 entrepreneurs” describes an activity and a product, not an objective; a correct formulation of the objective would be “The level of export readiness of small and medium-sized enterprises in the region has been raised”, whereas the training seminars and the number of participants serve as a result indicator.

Result indicators should combine a quantitative dimension (number of participants, number of documents prepared) and a qualitative dimension (level of satisfaction, growth in

competencies measured by pre- and post-testing), and should also distinguish between output indicators and outcome indicators.

3. Constructing work packages, tasks, activities, project deliverables, milestones and the implementation plan

3.1. Work Packages (WP)

A **work package** is a logically complete block of project activity, united by a common theme or function (for example, WP1 “Project Management”, WP2 “Research and Analysis”, WP3 “Development of Training Materials”, WP4 “Piloting and Implementation”, WP5 “Communication and Dissemination of Results”). Each work package has a designated leader (lead partner), participants, a budget, a timeframe and a list of expected deliverables.

3.2. Work Breakdown Structure (WBS)

The **WBS** is a hierarchical decomposition of the entire scope of project work into progressively smaller elements: work packages → tasks → activities → individual operations. The underlying principle of constructing a WBS is the 100% rule: the sum of the elements at each lower level must fully (with neither surplus nor deficit) describe the scope of the element at the level above.

3.3. Project deliverables and milestones

A **deliverable** is a specific, documented result of the completion of a task (a report, training manual, database, prototype, publication) submitted to the donor in accordance with the schedule.

A **milestone** is a significant event in the life of the project marking the completion of an important stage or the achievement of an intermediate result (unlike an activity, it has no duration or resource requirement); it is used to monitor progress and to make go/no-go decisions.

3.4. Scheduling

The work plan is accompanied by an implementation timetable, usually presented in the form of a Gantt chart, which visualises the duration and sequence of activities, as well as the interdependencies between work packages. A detailed examination of scheduling tools (Gantt chart, critical path) is undertaken in Topic 5.

4. Methodology for preparing the application form and the technical description of the project

Preparation of the application form is the final technical stage in drawing up a project proposal in accordance with the requirements of the specific donor and call. The preparation methodology comprises the following steps:

1. **Careful study of the Guidelines for Applicants** — the document that sets out the formal submission requirements (file format, length, language, deadline), the eligibility criteria for the applicant, partners and costs, and the evaluation methodology.
2. **Use of the official template** — the great majority of donors (including EU programmes, via the Funding & Tenders Portal) require submission through a standardised electronic form or a structured technical-description template (Part B / Technical Description), departure from whose structure constitutes grounds for formal rejection of the application.
3. **Compliance with length limits** — each section of the technical description generally has a strict page or character limit; exceeding it results in the submission system automatically truncating the text.
4. **Logical consistency across sections** — terminology, indicators, budget lines and work package titles must be identical throughout all sections of the application, the budget and the annexes.
5. **Language and stylistic editing** — the use of clear, concise, well-argued language, avoiding excessive use of the passive voice and sector-specific jargon inaccessible to a reviewer from another field.
6. **Technical checks before submission** — verifying that all mandatory fields have been correctly completed, that signatures and stamps are present, that the eSignatures of the coordinator and partners are valid, and submitting well in advance (given the possibility of technical failures on the portal in the final hours before the deadline).

5. Criteria for evaluating international project applications: relevance, quality, impact, sustainability, cost-effectiveness

The evaluation of project proposals by donors (including EU programmes) is carried out by independent external experts using a unified system of criteria, which generally comprises the following blocks.

Relevance. The degree to which the project corresponds to the objectives and priorities of the call, the relevance of the identified problem, the soundness of the choice of target groups, and the European added value for transnational cooperation.

Quality of Design and Implementation. The logical consistency (internal coherence) between the problem, objectives, activities and resources; the realism of the work plan and budget; the fit between the methodology and the tasks set; the capacity of the consortium (experience, competence, complementarity of partners); and the quality of the risk-management plan.

Impact. The potential scale and depth of positive change for the target groups and wider stakeholders; the quality of the plan for dissemination and exploitation of results; and the contribution to the donor's horizontal priorities.

Sustainability. The likelihood that the project's results and effects will be preserved after funding ends — the institutional capacity of partners to continue the activity, financial mechanisms, and the potential for scaling up or replicating the approach.

Cost-effectiveness / Value for Money. The relationship between the planned resources (budget) and the expected results; the soundness of the budget lines; and the absence of excessive or unjustified funding for particular items.

Each criterion is generally scored on a points scale (for example, from 0 to 5), with a threshold set both for each criterion individually and for the overall total score; applications that fail to meet the thresholds are rejected regardless of their overall ranking.

6. Common mistakes in writing grant applications and ways to prevent them

Analysis of the practice of rejecting project applications makes it possible to summarise the most common mistakes made by applicants.

1. **Failure to match the priorities of the call** — submitting a project idea that does not correspond to the thematic focus of the specific call, even where the problem is of high social significance. Prevention: careful prior analysis of the Guidelines for Applicants and consultation with the programme's National Contact Point.
2. **Vague or overly ambitious formulation of objectives**, unachievable within the available resources and timeframe. Prevention: application of the SMART rule, and matching the scale of the stated results to the budget requested.
3. **Lack of logical connection between sections of the application** — a mismatch between the stated indicators and the described methodology, or between the budget and the work plan. Prevention: constructing the logframe matrix before drafting the sections, and cross-checking terminology throughout.
4. **Weak justification of the partnership** — a formal list of partners without a clear division of roles or demonstration of their comparative advantage. Prevention: a detailed description of each partner's competencies linked to specific tasks in the work plan.
5. **Insufficient attention to the sustainability of results** — confining the description of sustainability to general declarations without a specific mechanism. Prevention: developing a concrete, realistic plan for institutional and financial sustainability already at the design stage.
6. **Breach of formal submission requirements** — exceeding length limits, failure to follow the template, missing mandatory annexes, late submission. Prevention: drawing up a checklist of compliance with formal requirements and submitting the application well in advance.
7. **An unrealistic or inappropriate budget** — inflated or unclear expenditure items, non-compliance with the donor's financial rules (examined in detail in Topic 6). Prevention: involving the consortium's financial manager in preparing the budget in parallel with the development of the substantive part of the application.

Self-check questions

1. Why is the executive summary traditionally prepared after work on all other sections of the application has been completed?

2. Give an example of the common mistake of “substituting means for objectives” and propose a correct formulation.
3. What is the 100% rule in constructing a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS)?
4. How does a milestone differ from a deliverable?
5. Explain the logic of thresholds in evaluating applications against individual criteria.
6. What steps help prevent breaches of the formal requirements for submitting an application?

Recommended reading

1. Aid Delivery Methods. Volume 1: Project Cycle Management Guidelines. European Commission, EuropeAid Cooperation Office.
2. Horizon Europe Programme Guide. European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation.
3. EU Grants: How to complete your ethics self-assessment. Funding & Tenders Portal Online Manual. European Commission.
4. A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide). 7th edition. Project Management Institute, 2021.
5. Erasmus+ Programme Guide. European Education and Culture Executive Agency.