

Lecture 3

Developing an International Project Proposal and Grant Application

Content Module 1 · Design and Preparation of International Projects

Full lecture text accompanying the presentation (30 slides)

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Introduction

► SLIDE 1

Lecture 3 belongs to Content Module 1, "Design and Preparation of International Projects", and marks the point at which the module moves from thinking to writing. Lecture 1 supplied the vocabulary and the project cycle. Lecture 2 taught the analytical work that stands behind a project: the problem and objective trees, stakeholder analysis, the theory of change, the logical framework matrix and the matching of an idea to donor priorities. A donor, however, does not fund an analysis. It funds a document, submitted in a prescribed format, read by independent external experts and scored against published criteria. This lecture shows how design becomes such a document, and how the document is judged.

The central idea is that a proposal is an argument. It begins with a problem that deserves attention, moves through a goal and a method, and ends with an effect that will outlast the grant. Templates differ in headings, page limits and vocabulary, but the sequence of the argument is stable, and an applicant who understands it can move between the templates of different programmes. The lecture also takes the evaluator's point of view: knowing how points are distributed and where applications typically fail is a form of preparation that good writing alone cannot replace.

► SLIDE 2

The lecture follows the path of an application from its overall structure to the moment at which it is scored, and it is organised in six sections:

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, deliverables, milestones and the implementation plan.
4. Methodology for preparing the application form and the technical description of the project.
5. Criteria for evaluating applications: relevance, quality, impact, sustainability, cost-effectiveness.
6. Common mistakes in writing grant applications and ways to prevent them.

The first three sections deal with the substance of the proposal, the fourth with the technical preparation of the application form, and the last two with the evaluator's view and the typical reasons for rejection.

By the end of this lecture, students should be able to:

1. describe the ten components of a typical international project proposal in their logical order, and explain why the executive summary is read first but written last;
2. distinguish outputs, outcomes and long-term impact, and identify the institutional, financial, political and environmental dimensions of sustainability;

3. formulate an overall goal, a specific objective, expected results and indicators in accordance with the SMART rule, and correct the substitution of means for objectives;
4. construct a system of work packages and a work breakdown structure that satisfies the 100% rule, distinguish deliverables from milestones, and read an implementation timetable presented as a Gantt chart;
5. apply the six-step methodology for preparing an application form and carry out the checks that precede submission;
6. explain how evaluators score applications against individual and overall thresholds, and diagnose the seven most common mistakes in grant applications together with the measures that prevent them.

1. The Structure of an International Project Proposal

► SLIDE 3

Three questions guide this section. Which sections does almost every proposal contain? Why is the executive summary written last, although it is the first thing a reader meets? And how do outputs, outcomes, impact and sustainability differ?

Donors use different templates, and a concept note is shorter than a full application. Yet the great majority of international project proposals share a common logical structure, which reflects the sequence of argumentation from the problem to the expected effect. An evaluator is, in effect, asking a chain of questions: is the problem real, what will change, by what means, according to what plan, with what lasting effect, by whom and at what cost? Each part of the proposal answers one of them, and a gap in the chain is noticed even when every part is well written.

The Anatomy of an International Project Proposal

► SLIDE 4

The slide shows ten components in the order in which the argument unfolds. They are summarised in the table below.

No.	Component	Function in the argument
1	Executive summary	Presents the essence of the project on no more than one page
2	Relevance and rationale	Demonstrates the problem, its scale and the fit with the call
3	Objectives	States the overall goal and the specific objectives
4	Methodology	Justifies the approach, methods and formats of work
5	Work plan	Breaks the work into work packages, tasks and activities
6	Expected results and impact	Describes outputs, outcomes and long-term impact with indicators
7	Sustainability	Explains how results retain their value after funding ends
8	Project management and consortium	Describes the management structure and the roles of partners
9	Budget	Presents costs by expenditure item, aligned with the work plan
10	Annexes	Supplies the supporting documents

The relevance and rationale section has to show that the problem exists, how large it is and why it matters to the target groups and to society. Its evidence is statistical data, research findings and strategic documents, not the applicant's conviction. The section also demonstrates that the idea fits the priorities of the specific call (Lecture 2, Section 6); a serious problem is not enough if the reader cannot see why this donor, through this call, should respond.

The objectives section states the overall goal and the specific objectives in accordance with the intervention logic developed in Lecture 2. The methodology explains how they will be pursued: it justifies the choice of methods, tools and activity formats and shows the logical link between the methodology and the expected results. Its task is to answer the question "why these activities and not others?" Without such justification, a list of activities reads as a programme of events.

The work plan, the subject of Section 3, translates the methodology into work packages, tasks and activities and indicates the responsible partners and timeframes. The management and consortium section describes the organisational structure, the division of roles among partners and the mechanisms of coordination and communication, themes that return in Lectures 4 and 5. The budget presents costs by expenditure item and must be aligned with the work plan (Lecture 6). The annexes hold the partner documents, CVs of key personnel, letters of support, declarations and the applicant's legal and financial documentation; they rarely persuade on their own, but a missing mandatory annex can undo the persuasion that precedes it.

The order of the components is an order of dependence: the methodology has no meaning without objectives, the work plan none without a methodology, and the budget is credible only if it mirrors the work plan. The logical framework matrix from Lecture 2 is the natural device for keeping them aligned.

The Executive Summary: Read First, Written Last

► SLIDE 5

The executive summary is a concise presentation of the essence of the project, as a rule no longer than one page. It covers the problem, the goal, the key activities, the expected results, the composition of the consortium, and the budget and duration. The slide sets two orders side by side. In the reading order the summary comes first: it opens the document and forms the reader's first impression of the project. In the writing order it comes last, because it is drafted only after sections 2 to 10 have been finalised and agreed.

The reason is that the summary condenses every other section, so it can be accurate only when those sections no longer change. In a consortium proposal the content is negotiated among partners, and the work plan, the budget and even the composition of the partnership may change several times before the text is final. The question in the speaker notes makes the point: what would happen to the summary if it were written first and the work plan later changed? The first page of the application would describe a project that no longer exists, and the mismatch with the sections that follow would be one of the inconsistencies discussed in Section 6.

Illustrative example. Suppose that an early draft of the summary states five work packages. During negotiations the partners merge two of them and recalculate the budget. If the summary is not revised, the evaluator reads one description on the first page and another in the work plan, and begins the assessment with a doubt about the reliability of the whole application.

None of this means that the idea should not be summarised early. A short working statement helps the team to agree on what it is proposing, but it is a working hypothesis, whereas the executive summary is a finished text. Because it forms the first impression, it should be checked line by line against the agreed proposal before submission.

From Outputs to Impact, and Beyond the Funding Period

► SLIDE 6

The section on expected results and impact describes three levels of effect, each with quantitative and qualitative indicators. **Outputs** are the immediate results of the project: what exists at the end of the activities that did not exist before, such as a trained group, a manual or a database. **Outcomes** are the intermediate effects, the changes that occur when the target group uses the outputs. **Impact** is the long-term change to which the project contributes, usually appearing after the project has finished and beyond the group reached directly. The levels correspond to the intervention logic of Lecture 2: outputs are the expected results, outcomes are the change described by the specific objective, and impact corresponds to the overall goal.

Illustrative example. In the hypothetical export-readiness project, an output would be that ten training seminars have been held and 200 entrepreneurs have completed them. An outcome would be that the participating enterprises can prepare export offers and are ready to approach foreign markets. The impact would be a stronger internationalisation of the regional economy, to which the project contributes together with many other factors.

The levels differ in how much control the project has over them. It controls its outputs almost entirely, influences its outcomes, because these depend on how the target group responds, and only contributes to impact, which is shaped by many other forces. An application that describes only outputs shows what will be produced but not why anyone should care; one that promises only impact makes commitments that it cannot keep. Evaluators look for the whole chain and for indicators at each level.

The sustainability section addresses a different question: how will the results retain their value after donor funding ends? The lecture distinguishes four dimensions. Institutional sustainability asks whether an organisation with the mandate and capacity will continue to use and maintain the results. Financial sustainability asks where the resources will come from once the grant has been spent. Political sustainability concerns whether the policy environment and decision-makers will continue to support the results. Environmental sustainability asks whether the results can be maintained without damaging the environmental resources on which they rely. A proposal need not treat all four equally, but it should explain the mechanism by which the relevant ones will be secured. Evaluators return to this question, since sustainability is a separate block of criteria (Section 5), and general declarations of good intention are one of the seven common mistakes in Section 6.

2. Formulating the Overall Goal, Specific Objectives, Expected Results and Indicators

► SLIDE 7

The wording of objectives is where the analysis of Lecture 2 becomes visible on the page. Three questions guide this section. How is the overall goal worded differently from the specific objective? Why are activities not objectives? And what makes a formulation SMART, and an indicator informative? The wording must strictly follow the hierarchy of the intervention logic examined in Lecture 2.

Formulating Each Level of the Hierarchy

► SLIDE 8

The slide arranges the four levels of the hierarchy in a table, with the way each is formulated and the way it is measured.

Level	How to formulate it	Typical wording	Measured by
Overall goal	A contribution to a broader strategic goal	"to contribute to ...", "to support the achievement of ..."	Long-term impact
Specific objective	A concrete, measurable effect for the target group, arising from the use of the project's results	"the level of ... has been raised", "access to ... has been expanded", "capacity ... has been strengthened"	Outcome indicators
Expected results	The immediate results (outputs) of the project, formulated according to the SMART rule	Statements of what is delivered	Output indicators
Activities	What the project does	"to conduct ...", "to organise ..."	Means and resources

The **overall goal** is worded as a contribution because no single project can, on its own, guarantee the achievement of a broader strategic goal. A project operates among other initiatives, policies and economic conditions, and its influence on a national or regional goal is real but shared. A goal worded as a guarantee, such as "to eliminate unemployment among young people", promises what the project cannot deliver. The phrases "to contribute to" and "to support the achievement of" express the correct degree of responsibility: the project is accountable for its own results and objective, and for the goal only as a contributor.

The **specific objective** is the change that the project itself is expected to bring about: a concrete, measurable effect for the target group, arising from the use of the project's results, worded as a desired change of state. Where a template asks for several specific objectives, each must satisfy the same rules; Lecture 2 explained why the logical framework treats the project purpose as a single, focused change, and the more objectives a proposal contains, the harder it becomes to say what the project is actually for.

Activities occupy the bottom of the hierarchy, and this is where the verbs "to conduct" and "to organise" belong. A simple test separates the levels. If a formulation can be followed by the question "so that what changes for the target group?" and has no answer, it is an activity; if it already states what has changed, it is an objective. Expected results stand between the two: they are the products that the activities create and that the target group will use.

The right-hand column shows that measurement follows the hierarchy. The overall goal is assessed through long-term impact, which lies largely beyond the project period; the specific objective through outcome indicators; the expected results through output indicators; and activities through the means and resources consumed. A proposal whose indicators do not correspond to the level they claim to measure will be read as poorly designed.

Substituting Means for Objectives, and the Correction

► SLIDE 9

The most common defect in the wording of objectives is the substitution of means for objectives. The formulation "To conduct 10 training seminars for 200 entrepreneurs" describes an activity and a product: it says what the project will do and how many people it will reach,

but not what will be different afterwards. A correct objective is "The level of export readiness of small and medium-sized enterprises in the region has been raised". The wording has changed from an action to a change of state, and the evaluative question becomes clear: has the level of export readiness in fact been raised?

The numbers are not lost. The ten seminars and the 200 participants remain in the proposal as a result indicator, and the seminars remain in the work plan as activities. The correction moves each element to the level where it belongs.

The reason for insisting on the distinction is practical. Under the original wording a project would count as successful as soon as ten seminars had been held, even if the enterprises had learnt nothing that helped them to export. Under the corrected wording the project is accountable for the change, and the evaluator can see that the applicant understands the difference between doing something and achieving something. The two vocabularies must be kept apart: objectives use phrases such as "has been raised", "has been expanded" and "has been strengthened", whereas activities use verbs such as "to conduct" and "to organise".

A corrected objective is not yet a complete one, since "export readiness" must be made observable. The next slide addresses this through the SMART rule and indicator design.

Illustrative example. Two possible outcome indicators for the corrected objective could be: "by the end of month 24, 60 of the 200 participating entrepreneurs have prepared a written export plan", and "the average score of participants in the post-test exceeds the average score in the pre-test". The figures are hypothetical and are given only to show the form of an indicator.

The SMART Rule and the Design of Result Indicators

► SLIDE 10

The SMART rule is a test that applies to every formulation of objectives and results. Each must be **Specific**, so that different readers understand it in the same way; **Measurable**, so that progress can be verified; **Achievable** within the available resources; **Relevant** to the identified problem; and **Time-bound**, so that it is clear by when the change is expected. The letters guard against different faults. Specificity and measurability prevent vague promises. Achievability keeps ambition in proportion to the budget and timeframe, which links to the mistake of overambitious objectives (Section 6). Relevance ties the formulation to the problem tree of Lecture 2, and the time limit gives every objective a date against which it can be judged.

Indicators make this measurement concrete, and the slide asks the designer to take two decisions about them. The first is to combine two dimensions. Quantitative indicators count things, such as the number of participants or the number of documents prepared. Qualitative indicators describe quality or change, such as the level of satisfaction or growth in competencies measured by pre- and post-testing. Either alone misleads: a count of 200 trained participants says nothing about whether the training was useful, and high satisfaction says nothing about how many people were reached. Pre- and post-testing shows how a qualitative matter can be made measurable, by converting growth in competencies into a comparison of scores.

The second decision is to distinguish two levels. Output indicators measure the immediate results of the project, and outcome indicators measure the intermediate effects for the target group. The two classifications are independent. The number of documents prepared is a quantitative output indicator; growth in competencies measured by testing is a qualitative indicator that speaks about the effect on the target group and therefore sits closer to the outcome level. Every indicator also needs a source from which its value can be verified, as Lecture 2 explained for the logical framework, and Lecture 8 returns to indicators in the context of monitoring and evaluation.

3. Work Packages, Deliverables, Milestones and the Implementation Plan

► SLIDE 11

Objectives state what is to change; the work plan states who will do what, in what order and by when. This section turns objectives into a plan of work through four instruments: work packages, the work breakdown structure, deliverables and milestones, and the implementation timetable. Three questions guide it. What is a work package and what does it contain? What does the 100% rule require of a WBS? How does a milestone differ from a deliverable? Detailed scheduling tools are examined in Lecture 5, so the treatment of the timetable here remains introductory.

Work Packages: Logically Complete Blocks of Activity

► SLIDE 12

A work package is a logically complete block of project activity, united by a common theme or function.

Work packages give the plan its first level of structure. Instead of a long list of activities, the applicant presents a small number of blocks, each with a clear purpose. The lecture's example uses five: WP1 Project Management, WP2 Research and Analysis, WP3 Development of Training Materials, WP4 Piloting and Implementation, and WP5 Communication and Dissemination of Results. Read in sequence they follow the natural logic of a project: the work is managed, the situation is analysed, materials are developed, they are tested in practice and the results are communicated. The structure is a typical pattern and not a universal template.

Each work package has five attributes, and each answers a question that an evaluator is likely to ask. A **designated leader** (the lead partner) shows who is accountable. The **participants** show which partners contribute and how tasks are divided in the consortium. A **budget** shows what the package costs and allows the reader to check that resources are distributed in proportion to the work (Lecture 6). A **timeframe** shows when the work begins and ends. The **list of expected deliverables** shows what the package will produce and how the donor can verify it. A package lacking any of these attributes is an unfinished description, and the gap tends to reappear as an inconsistency elsewhere in the application.

The work packages also carry the argument about the partnership. If each package has a leader chosen for a stated competence, the proposal demonstrates the complementarity of the partners without further declarations; if the leaders are chosen at random, the partnership looks like a formality, which is one of the common mistakes listed in Section 6.

The WBS: Decomposing the Scope of Work

► SLIDE 13

The work breakdown structure (WBS) is a hierarchical decomposition of the entire scope of project work into progressively smaller elements: work packages, then tasks, then activities, then individual operations.

The WBS extends the idea of the work package downwards. The whole project is divided into work packages, each package into tasks, each task into activities and each activity into operations, until the elements are small enough to be planned, assigned and costed. The governing principle is the **100% rule**: the sum of the elements at each lower level must fully describe the scope of the element at the level above, with neither surplus nor deficit.

The slide decomposes one branch, WP3, as an illustration; every other branch is decomposed in the same way. The five work packages together account for 100% of the project. Within WP3, Tasks 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 make up 100% of the work package; within Task 3.2, Activities 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 make up 100% of the task; and within Activity 3.2.1, Operations 1, 2 and 3 make up 100% of the activity. The numbering records where each element sits, so that any activity can be traced to its parent task and package.

The rule excludes two failures. A **deficit** means that some necessary work does not appear in the structure; it will nevertheless have to be done, without a planned owner, timeframe or budget, and it is a common source of overruns. A **surplus** means that the structure contains work that does not belong to the parent element; it consumes resources without contributing to the deliverables, and an evaluator may read it as unjustified funding. The rule is therefore a completeness check in both directions, and the WBS reappears in Lecture 5 in the management of project scope.

Illustrative example. Suppose that WP3, Development of Training Materials, is divided into Task 3.1 (design of the curriculum), Task 3.2 (preparation of the training manual) and Task 3.3 (review and approval of the materials). Task 3.2 might contain Activity 3.2.1, drafting the modules, and Activity 3.2.2, editing and translation, and Activity 3.2.1 could consist of three operations: collecting source material, writing the texts and internal review. If the approval of the materials were needed but appeared in no task, the structure would have a deficit; a study visit unrelated to the manual would be a surplus. The names are hypothetical.

Deliverables versus Milestones

► SLIDE 14

*A **deliverable** is a specific, documented result of the completion of a task (a report, training manual, database, prototype or 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.*

The slide compares the two concepts on three points.

	Deliverable	Milestone
What it is	A specific, documented result of the completion of a task	A significant event marking the completion of an important stage or the achievement of an intermediate result
Form	A tangible product: a report, training manual, database, prototype or publication	A point in time: unlike an activity, it has no duration or resource requirement
What it is used for	Submitted to the donor in accordance with the schedule	Monitoring progress and making go/no-go decisions

The difference is that between a thing and an event. A deliverable is something that exists and can be handed over, inspected and stored. A milestone is a moment at which a condition becomes true. An activity has duration and consumes resources, whereas a milestone marks the end of work and is not itself work. The two are often related, since the event "analysis completed" is typically confirmed when the analytical report is finished and accepted, but they are not the same: the report is the deliverable, and the recognition that the stage is complete is the milestone.

The instruments serve different purposes. Deliverables are the evidence that the donor receives, and their submission according to the schedule is how the donor follows the progress of the work. Milestones are checkpoints for the consortium itself, giving the coordinator a moment at which to ask whether the project is on course. Because a milestone is a defined point, it can support a go/no-go decision: if the materials have not been approved, piloting may need to be postponed or redesigned. This answers self-assessment question 4.

The Implementation Timetable as a Gantt Chart

► SLIDE 15

The work plan is accompanied by an implementation timetable, usually presented as a Gantt chart, which visualises the duration and sequence of activities and the interdependencies between work packages. The chart on the slide is an illustrative 24-month example built on the five work packages of the lecture. The horizontal axis is divided into four six-month bands, the rows are the work packages, and three kinds of symbol are added to the bars: diamonds for milestones, gold document icons for deliverables submitted, and arrows for dependencies.

Illustrative example. The following schedule reproduces the chart on the slide. It is a hypothetical 24-month project and is not a recommended template.

Work package	Months	Deliverable
WP1 Project management	1 to 24	none shown
WP2 Research and analysis	1 to 6	D2.1 at the end of the package
WP3 Training materials	7 to 14	D3.1 at the end of the package
WP4 Piloting and implementation	15 to 22	D4.1 at the end of the package
WP5 Communication and dissemination	1 to 24	none shown

The three milestones fall at the ends of the sequential packages: MS1, "Analysis completed", at the end of month 6; MS2, "Materials approved", at the end of month 14; and MS3, "Piloting completed", at the end of month 22. Two arrows show finish-to-start dependencies: WP3 begins only when WP2 has finished, and WP4 begins only when WP3 has finished.

Several features of the chart illustrate general principles. WP1 and WP5 run for the full 24 months, because management and communication accompany all other work. WP2, WP3 and WP4 form a chain of 6, 8 and 8 months, which together occupy 22 of the 24 months. Because each package in the chain depends on the completion of the previous one, a delay in WP2 would move every later date, and the dependency arrows make this visible. The two months after MS3 are not assigned to the chain; whether that is a sensible reserve is a judgement about risk that belongs to Lecture 5, where the Gantt chart is treated together with the critical path. In a proposal the chart allows the evaluator to check the realism of the work plan at a glance.

4. Preparing the Application Form and the Technical Description

► SLIDE 16

Preparation of the application form is the final technical stage in drawing up a proposal, and it must follow the requirements of the specific donor and call. A proposal that is strong in substance can still be lost through poor technical preparation. Three questions guide this section. What must be extracted from the Guidelines for Applicants? Why can a departure from the template lead to rejection? Which checks should precede submission? The methodology comprises six steps.

Six Steps in Preparing the Application Form

► SLIDE 17

The first step is the careful study of the **Guidelines for Applicants**. This document sets out the formal submission requirements (file format, length, language and deadline), the eligibility criteria for the applicant, the partners and the costs, and the evaluation methodology. It should be read before any writing begins, since an ineligible application cannot succeed however good

it is, and the evaluation methodology shows where the points are awarded. Lecture 4 examines donor programmes and their rules in more detail.

The second step is the use of the official template. The great majority of donors, including EU programmes through the Funding & Tenders Portal, require submission through a standardised electronic form or a structured technical-description template, known as Part B or the Technical Description, and a departure from its structure constitutes grounds for formal rejection. The ten-part structure of Section 1 is a generic model and does not replace the template: the applicant must map its components onto the headings that the template prescribes, not impose an order of their own.

The third step is compliance with length limits. Each section of the technical description generally has a strict page or character limit, and text that exceeds it is truncated automatically by the submission system. Whatever stands at the end of an overlong section may therefore never reach the evaluator, and it is often the concluding argument, such as the sustainability mechanism, that stands there. The limits also enforce discipline, since a section written to fit the space forces the applicant to select the strongest evidence.

The remaining three steps are developed on the next two slides.

One Proposal, One Vocabulary

► SLIDE 18

The fourth step, logical consistency across sections, is expressed on the slide as a set of equalities. Terminology, indicators, budget lines and work package titles must be identical throughout all sections of the application, the budget and the annexes. An evaluator reads the proposal as a whole and tests it against itself. If a work package is called "Piloting and Implementation" in the work plan but "Pilot phase" in the budget, the reader must guess whether the two refer to the same activities; if an indicator is worded differently in two sections, the reader will wonder which one is binding. Each mismatch weakens the impression of internal coherence, which belongs to the criterion of quality of design and implementation (Section 5) and figures among the typical mistakes in Section 6. A practical measure is to fix the names of work packages, deliverables and indicators at the start and to give everyone who writes or edits a single list of terms.

The fifth step is language and stylistic editing. Aim for clear language, concise wording and well-argued statements, meaning that each claim is supported by evidence or reasoning and not merely asserted. Avoid excessive use of the passive voice and sector-specific jargon that a reviewer from another field cannot follow. The second point follows from the fact that evaluators are independent external experts, so a reader from a neighbouring field should be able to follow the text without a glossary. The passive voice is discouraged because it hides responsibility, and a proposal must make clear who does what.

Illustrative example. The sentence "Training will be carried out and materials will be prepared" does not say by whom. The revision "Partner 2 will train 200 entrepreneurs, and Partner 3 will

prepare the training manual" names the responsible partner, links the statement to the work plan and is no longer than the original.

From the Guidelines for Applicants to a Safe Submission

► SLIDE 19

The sixth step is the set of technical checks before submission. The Guidelines for Applicants set out the formal requirements, the eligibility criteria and the evaluation methodology, that is, the criteria and procedure by which applications are assessed, to which we turn in Section 5. From these requirements the checklist derives. It asks whether:

- all mandatory fields have been correctly completed;
- signatures and stamps are present;
- the eSignatures of the coordinator and the partners are valid;
- the structure of the official template has been followed;
- page and character limits have been respected;
- all mandatory annexes are attached.

The last instruction on the slide is to submit well in advance, since technical failures on the portal are possible in the final hours before the deadline. The validity of the eSignatures deserves particular mention. In an international consortium the signatories are in different organisations and countries, and the coordinator should establish early that each of them can actually sign. The checklist is best assigned to one person, ideally someone who did not write the text, since authors tend to read what they meant and not what is on the page.

Together with the list of formal requirements in Section 6, these steps answer self-assessment question 6. In summary, breaches of the formal requirements are prevented by studying the Guidelines, using the official template, respecting the limits, keeping the sections consistent, working through a written checklist and submitting early.

5. Criteria for Evaluating International Project Applications

► SLIDE 20

Donors, including EU programmes, evaluate project proposals through independent external experts using a unified system of criteria, and writing with those criteria in view is the most direct way to improve an application. Three questions guide this section. Which blocks of criteria do evaluators apply? How do individual and overall thresholds work? How do Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ set scores and thresholds?

Five Blocks of Evaluation Criteria

► SLIDE 21

The lecture groups the criteria into five blocks. Each is scored on a points scale, with thresholds explained on the next slide.

Criterion	What evaluators examine
Relevance	Fit with the objectives and priorities of the call; relevance of the problem; choice of target groups; European added value for transnational cooperation
Quality of design and implementation	Internal coherence; a realistic work plan and budget; fit of the methodology; consortium capacity; risk management
Impact	Scale and depth of change for target groups and stakeholders; dissemination and exploitation; horizontal priorities
Sustainability	Likelihood that results last after funding ends; partners' capacity, financial mechanisms, scaling up or replication
Cost-effectiveness (value for money)	Budget in relation to expected results; sound budget lines; no excessive or unjustified funding

Relevance asks whether the project corresponds to the objectives and priorities of the call, whether the identified problem is genuinely pressing, whether the target groups have been chosen soundly and whether the project offers European added value for transnational cooperation.

Quality of design and implementation is the broadest block. It examines the logical consistency between problem, objectives, activities and resources; the realism of the work plan and budget; the fit between methodology and tasks; the capacity of the consortium in experience, competence and complementarity of partners; and the quality of the risk-management plan. The ten components of Section 1 include no separate risk section, so the applicant must ensure that risks are addressed in whichever section the template provides (Lecture 7 treats risk management in detail).

Impact concerns 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, which Lecture 2 named as gender equality, environmental sustainability, digitalisation and non-discrimination. **Sustainability** asks how likely it is that results and effects will be preserved after funding ends, looking at the institutional capacity of partners, the financial mechanisms and the potential for scaling up or replicating the approach. **Cost-effectiveness**, or value for money, compares planned resources with expected results and asks whether the budget lines are sound and no item is excessive or unjustified.

The criteria correspond to the structure of the proposal. Relevance draws on the rationale and objectives; quality on the methodology, work plan and management section; impact on the results section; sustainability on its own section; and cost-effectiveness on the budget. A proposal that is complete in the sense of Section 1 therefore contains the evidence for every criterion, and the evaluator's task is to find it.

Two Filters Before Ranking: The Logic of Thresholds

► SLIDE 22

Each criterion is generally scored on a points scale, for example from 0 to 5, and thresholds are set both for each criterion individually and for the overall total. Applications that fail to meet the thresholds are rejected regardless of their overall ranking. The slide gives a hypothetical case with a scale of 0 to 5, a threshold of 3 for each criterion and an overall threshold of 15 out of 25.

Illustrative example. The scores below are hypothetical and are used only to demonstrate how thresholds operate.

Criterion	Threshold	Application A	Application B
Relevance	3	5	4
Quality of design and implementation	3	4	4
Impact	3	5	3
Sustainability	3	2	3
Cost-effectiveness	3	5	4
Total score (overall threshold 15 of 25)	15	21	18

The first filter is that every criterion must reach its individual threshold. Application A obtains 5, 4, 5, 2 and 5 points, a total of 21, but its score for sustainability is 2, which is below the threshold of 3. It is rejected, despite having the higher total. Application B obtains 4, 4, 3, 3 and 4 points, a total of 18. Each score is at or above 3, so the first filter is passed, and 18 exceeds the overall threshold of 15, so the second filter is passed as well. Only B enters the ranking.

The logic of individual thresholds is that a high total should not conceal a serious weakness. If only the sum counted, strengths in some criteria would compensate for failure in another, and a brilliant project without any credible plan for its continuation could be funded. Individual thresholds prevent this compensation: the donor requires a minimum acceptable level in every dimension it considers essential. This answers self-assessment question 5. The lesson for the writer follows directly: the weakest criterion, not the strongest, decides the fate of an application, and effort should go into lifting the weakest sections above their thresholds. A sustainability section that consists of declarations (mistake 5 in Section 6) is precisely how an otherwise strong proposal falls below a threshold.

In this example the overall threshold of 15 equals the sum of the five individual thresholds (5 times 3), so an application that passes the first filter necessarily passes the second. In the two programmes examined on the next slide the two are set separately, and the overall threshold demands more than the individual ones combined. Passing both filters admits an application to the ranking; it does not by itself amount to a funding decision.

Scores and Thresholds in Two EU Programmes

► SLIDE 23

Two EU programmes illustrate how these principles are applied. The programmes group the five generic blocks differently, and Horizon Europe, for example, has no separate sustainability criterion. The applicant should therefore map the generic blocks onto the criteria of the specific call and check that every block is covered somewhere.

For Horizon Europe, in the case of Research and Innovation Actions and Innovation Actions (full applications), there are three award criteria, each scored out of 5:

Criterion	Threshold	Maximum
Excellence	3	5
Impact	3	5
Quality and efficiency of the implementation	3	5

An overall threshold of 10 applies to the sum of the three scores, which is out of 15. For ranking Innovation Actions the Impact score is weighted by 1.5.

European Commission, Horizon Europe Work Programme 2026–2027, General Annexes, Annex D.

For Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships (Key Action 2), there are four criteria with maximum scores of 25, 30, 20 and 25 points:

Criterion	Minimum	Maximum
Relevance of the project	13	25
Quality of the project design and implementation	15	30
Quality of the partnership and the cooperation arrangements	10	20
Impact	13	25

A proposal must score at least 70 of the 100 points, and at least half of the maximum points in each criterion. The minima shown correspond to half of each maximum, rounded up where the half is not a whole number.

European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2026, Part B: Cooperation partnerships.

The figures confirm the point made above. In Horizon Europe the three individual thresholds add up to only 9, whereas the overall threshold is 10, so an application that only just clears every criterion still fails overall. In Erasmus+ the four minima add up to 51, whereas the overall requirement is 70, so the overall filter is the demanding one. The weighting of Impact shows a further feature: thresholds decide admission to the ranking, whereas weighting shapes the order within it. These rules belong to particular editions of the work programme and programme guide, so the current document for the call concerned must always be consulted.

6. Common Mistakes in Writing Grant Applications and Ways to Prevent Them

► SLIDE 24

Analysis of the practice of rejecting applications makes it possible to summarise the mistakes that applicants make most often. Three questions guide this section. Which mistakes most often lead to rejection? How can each be prevented? At which stage of preparation should each safeguard be applied? Several of the measures must be taken before drafting or already at the design stage.

Seven Common Mistakes and Ways to Prevent Them

► SLIDE 25

The slide pairs each mistake with its remedy. The third column of the table, which is added here, shows which of the evaluation criteria of Section 5 the mistake endangers.

No.	Common mistake	Way to prevent it	Criterion at risk
1	Mismatch with the call's priorities	Analyse the Guidelines for Applicants in advance; consult the programme's National Contact Point	Relevance
2	Vague or overambitious objectives	Apply the SMART rule; match the scale of the stated results to the budget requested	Quality of design
3	No logical link between sections	Construct the logframe matrix before drafting; cross-check terminology throughout	Quality of design
4	Weak justification of the partnership	Describe each partner's competencies and link them to specific tasks	Quality (consortium capacity)
5	Sustainability as a declaration	Develop a concrete, realistic plan for institutional and financial sustainability at the design stage	Sustainability
6	Breach of formal requirements	Draw up a checklist of compliance; submit well in advance	Formal compliance
7	Unrealistic or inappropriate budget	Involve the consortium's financial manager in the budget, in parallel with the substantive part	Cost-effectiveness

The first mistake is a failure to match the priorities of the call: the idea does not correspond to the thematic focus of the specific call, even when the problem is of high social significance. The remedy is analysis of the Guidelines in advance and consultation with the programme's National Contact Point.

The second mistake is vagueness or over-ambition, with objectives that cannot be achieved within the available resources and timeframe. The SMART rule of Section 2 addresses both, and the scale of the stated results must be matched to the budget requested. The third mistake is the lack of a logical connection between sections, for instance an indicator that does not correspond to the methodology or a budget that does not follow the work plan. The remedy is to construct the logframe matrix before drafting, so that the sections are written from one agreed skeleton, and to cross-check terminology throughout.

The fourth mistake is a weak justification of the partnership: a formal list of partners without a clear division of roles or a demonstration of comparative advantage. The remedy is a detailed description of each partner's competencies linked to specific tasks in the work plan, the device already noted in the discussion of work packages. The fifth is insufficient attention to sustainability, where the description consists of general declarations without a mechanism. The remedy is a concrete, realistic plan for institutional and financial sustainability, drawn up at the design stage.

Illustrative example. A declaration reads: "The results will be sustainable because of the high quality of the materials." A mechanism reads: "After month 24 the training course will be integrated into the regular programme of Partner 3, financed from participant fees." Similarly, "Partner 4 is an experienced university" becomes "Partner 4, through its research centre, will lead Task 2.1 because it holds the regional data that the analysis requires." Both revisions are hypothetical and show only the difference between a claim and a mechanism.

The sixth mistake is a breach of the formal submission requirements: exceeding length limits, ignoring the template, omitting mandatory annexes or submitting late. Such breaches can lead to formal rejection irrespective of the quality of the content, and the safeguards are a compliance checklist and early submission. The seventh is an unrealistic or inappropriate budget, with inflated or unclear items or non-compliance with the donor's financial rules (Lecture 6). The remedy is to involve the consortium's financial manager in preparing the budget in parallel with the substantive part, not after it.

Building Prevention into the Preparation Process

► SLIDE 26

The last slide of the section arranges the safeguards by the moment at which they should be applied. The numbers in the table refer to the seven mistakes.

Before drafting	While drafting	Before submission
Analyse the Guidelines for Applicants; consult the National Contact Point (1)	Apply the SMART rule; match the scale of results to the budget (2)	Cross-check terminology, indicators and budget lines (3)
Construct the logframe matrix before drafting the sections (3)	Link each partner's competencies to specific tasks (4)	Work through the checklist of formal requirements (6)
	Plan institutional and financial sustainability at the design stage (5)	Submit well in advance of the deadline (6)
	Prepare the budget with the financial manager, in parallel (7)	

The arrangement changes how the advice should be used. Most safeguards belong before or alongside drafting, not at the end. The tasks placed immediately before submission are checks: they can detect a mismatch of terminology or a missing annex, but they cannot repair a proposal whose idea does not fit the call, whose logic was never fixed in a logframe or whose

sustainability was never planned. Mistakes 3 and 6 appear twice, because each needs one measure early and another late.

The practical consequence is that the preparation calendar should be constructed backwards from the deadline, with time reserved at the end for cross-checking, the checklist and technical submission, and with the analytical steps completed before writing begins.

Conclusion

► SLIDE 27

The lecture has followed an application from its overall structure to the moment at which it is scored. A proposal is an argument that runs from the problem to the expected effect, and its ten components are the steps of that argument. Objectives are worded at the right level of the hierarchy, work packages and the WBS give them a form that can be planned and costed, and deliverables, milestones and the timetable make the plan verifiable. The application form imposes its own discipline: the template, the limits, one vocabulary throughout and checks made in good time. Evaluators, finally, read the result against a small number of criteria and reject applications that fall below a threshold on any one of them. The common mistakes are, for the most part, breaks in this chain, and the measures that prevent them belong largely to the early stages of preparation.

Key takeaways:

- Most proposals share one logical structure, from the problem to the expected effect; the executive summary opens the document but is written last.
- The overall goal is a contribution; the specific objective is a measurable change of state for the target group; activities are not objectives.
- SMART formulations and indicators that combine quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and separate outputs from outcomes, make results verifiable.
- Work packages, a WBS built on the 100% rule, deliverables, milestones and a Gantt chart turn objectives into an implementation plan.
- The application form demands the official template, length limits, cross-section consistency, technical checks and early submission.
- Evaluators score relevance, quality, impact, sustainability and cost-effectiveness against individual and overall thresholds; common mistakes are preventable.

The next lecture, Lecture 4, "Grant Funding, Donor Programmes and Building an International Consortium", moves from the document to its context: the programmes that fund international projects, the rules under which they operate and the partnership on which every consortium application depends.

Questions for Self-Assessment

► SLIDE 28

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

► SLIDE 29

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.

► SLIDE 30

The closing slide opens the discussion. Questions on the structure of the proposal, the work plan or the evaluation criteria are welcome at this point, and the lecture continues with Lecture 4.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Executive summary	A concise presentation of the essence of the project, as a rule no longer than one page, covering the problem, goal, key activities, expected results, consortium, budget and duration; placed first but written last
Overall goal	The broader strategic goal to which the project contributes; worded as a contribution ("to contribute to ...") because no single project can guarantee its achievement
Specific objective	A concrete, measurable effect for the target group arising from the use of the project's results, worded as a desired change of state

Term	Definition
Output	An immediate result of the project, such as a trained group, a manual or a database; measured by output indicators
Outcome	An intermediate effect that occurs when the target group uses the outputs; measured by outcome indicators
Impact	The long-term change to which the project contributes beyond its own period and immediate target group
Sustainability	The capacity of the project's results to retain their value after donor funding ends; considered in its institutional, financial, political and environmental dimensions
SMART rule	A test requiring every formulation of objectives and results to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable within the available resources, Relevant to the identified problem and Time-bound
Indicator	A quantitative or qualitative measure of achievement at a given level; output indicators measure results, outcome indicators measure effects for the target group
Substitution of means for objectives	The mistake of stating an activity or product ("to conduct 10 seminars") in place of the change of state that the project is meant to achieve
Work package (WP)	A logically complete block of project activity united by a common theme or function, with a leader, participants, a budget, a timeframe and deliverables
Work breakdown structure (WBS)	A hierarchical decomposition of the entire scope of project work into work packages, tasks, activities and operations
100% rule	The principle that the elements at each level of the WBS must fully describe the scope of the element above, with neither surplus nor deficit
Deliverable	A specific, documented result of the completion of a task, submitted to the donor in accordance with the schedule
Milestone	A significant event marking the completion of an important stage or an intermediate result; it has no duration or resource requirement and supports go/no-go decisions
Guidelines for Applicants	The document that sets out the formal submission requirements, the eligibility criteria and the evaluation methodology for a call
Technical description (Part B)	The structured template in which the substantive content of an application is presented, whose structure and length limits must be followed
Threshold	The minimum score that an application must reach on an individual criterion or in total; an application below a threshold is rejected regardless of its total

Sources for Current Data

1. European Commission, Horizon Europe Work Programme 2026–2027, General Annexes, Annex D: award criteria, scores and thresholds for Research and Innovation Actions and Innovation Actions (Section 5, slide 23).

2. European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2026, Part B: Cooperation partnerships: award criteria, maximum scores and minimum thresholds (Section 5, slide 23).

Thresholds and scoring rules are set for particular editions of these documents and may change; the current version for the call concerned must be checked.